





THE LIBRARY  
OF  
THE UNIVERSITY  
OF CALIFORNIA  
LOS ANGELES

Smith



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2007 with funding from  
Microsoft Corporation



# **GREEN LADIES**



# GREEN LADIES

BY  
W. DOUGLAS NEWTON

AUTHOR OF  
"WAR," "THE UNDYING STORY," "PHILIP IN PARTICULAR,"  
"THE WAR CACHE," ETC.



D. APPLETON AND COMPANY  
NEW YORK LONDON

1919

COPYRIGHT, 1919, BY  
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PR  
6027  
N'489g

TO YOU, MY DEAR

1763067



# GREEN LADIES

## I

PETER JOHN glanced at his cigarette and looked at the scene. His neat and distinguished features were quizzical as he lifted his eyes from the delicate paper tube to the gem-like perfection of the view. His air had a whimsical interrogation.

"Should one," he inquired of his mind, "regard tobacco in this air as an abomination? Could one pretend that it is frankincense on the altar of beauty?"

He stood drawing in the still and scented air in luxuriant breaths.

"No," he decided, "this is a cigarette view, delicate, fragrant, tranquillizing. And also there is no one to contradict me."

He went on smoking his cigarette. It was, after all, a burnt offering to beauty.

Having settled the matter in his mind, he tasted deep again of the scene, his eyes dwelling upon it with the slow, fine rapture of a pundit.

## GREEN LADIES

"Yes," he admitted presently, "the pilgrimage ends. This is the promised land, even better than its promise."

He looked down at the sequins of gold shining on the sea; the trees so pleasantly concentrating the view. The framing of jade and emerald made poignant the moving expanses of the vision; clarified it; gave it a bright light all its own.

"If one put that on to a stage," he reflected, "the critics, God bless them, would quote Theocritus. That is all the critics save the Johnny who does the thing for *The Times*. He would quote Sadi."

He rested his elbows on the Gothic balustrade that had once been part of a Benedictine cloister.

"Fortunately one could not get it on to the stage," he decided. "It would kill all theatrical realism with its natural unreality."



## II

WITHOUT doubt it was a bright, shining and ravishing view.

Beneath the white stone balustrade, and carved from out the gentle slope that sank towards the sea, there was a little formal garden. A tantalizing morsel of a garden, with infantile gravel paths, which were rather less gravel than moss; stone green moss that looks like felt. Green places had been let into the surface of the garden. Geometrical beds performed Euclid in the midst of the green. In the beds were flowers burning, rather like many heaps of multi-colored jewels spilt by a child—but a child with a color sense prettily developed.

On one side of the garden the white austerity of the house stood up without any nonsense. From the end of the house, trees, all nonsense, and all delicious, marched down towards the sea.

The wall of green-black trees sent out shadows into the garden, but in the heart of the trees were swaying lights of gold where the sun overcame the foliage.

## GREEN LADIES

On the other side of the garden were trees also, massed and dark. There was any amount of pines trying to look like a battalion of His Majesty's Regiment of Guards standing on that parade ground which battle-writers always have the good fortune to find in battles, but only succeeding, after all, in looking exactly like pines. Unless, of course, they were firs, looking exactly like firs.

These two walls of trees ran downhill, but gently, as the hill sank softly.

Fifty yards down the hill the infantile garden had had enough of it. An iron rail fence stopped it with a ruthless gesture. ("A very dull fence," considered Peter. "I will not stand it.") The independent trees went on. They fringed, in a filagree of leaves, a well barbered paddock. Paddock and trees and the world ended as the high notes of a song, sharp against the sea.

If it could be called the sea.

Peter called it the sea, all ordinance maps and ancient mariners to the contrary. It looked exactly like a sea. Call it a Solent if you like; many people possessing automobiles and houses in the best postal districts have done so. Peter thought better of it. Almost anything could be a Solent; only an ocean on its best behavior could be a sea.

It was delicately blue-green, as only the sea of

## GREEN LADIES

the southern English coast can be blue-green. It was bright and virile. It was as happy and vivacious as becomes a sea that does not have to labor under the alias of the German Ocean, as becomes a sea that bears so much eager youth to the lands of promise, and brings so many people to the sight of home again.

It was now at its green-blue best; full of movement, brisk and blowing with a big air. On its surface the sun was hammering little scallops of gold. The deep strength of the trees cut into it squarely on either side, and the green darkness of the leaves gave it a quick, moist color, quite like the quick freshness in all those pictures by all those painters we like.

And at the back of the sea, hanging in mauve and emerald and pearl, was the Island.

There is only one Island. Just here—and Peter had the jolly feeling that it was doing it because it liked him—the Island was tapering down to the pearl-pink, slightly self-conscious (had not a Poet Laureate, tierce of Canary and all, stood on them and made verses more or less immortal?) cliffs of The Needles.

Beyond the point was the lighthouse, and beyond and beyond, the swinging sea, going on, apparently, to eternity, but only reaching America after all.

## GREEN LADIES

Over the Island and the sea the big, soft, well-hung clouds dozed aloft, and behind the clouds hung the splendid blue banner of heaven. And then, to add a decorative touch, the celestial artist who had made it all up had placed a long slim ship, a gray ship with a red funnel and a voyage to Port Elizabeth in its chart-house, just at that spot where a gray ship with a red funnel should be.

Peter was enraptured at the genius of that ship. It made the view so human.

And it was a bewitching view.

Peter adored it with his eyes. He stood there gazing into it, allowing himself to be morally overcome by it, until, presently, a very wise old man—who, having risked his life on many occasions, and gone through battles in which great numbers of men had been killed, was now arrived at the right condition to water flowers—came to speak to him.

Even then Peter's eyes still held the view, and, as he did not move, the old man stood at his shoulder, and he looked at the view as though he, too, had been morally overcome by it, yet was still unrepentant.

After a minute he said very softly:

"It's a fine night, sir. You may go to many

## GREEN LADIES

famous places and see many wonders, but I don't think you would see anything so rare as this."

"I haven't been to many wonderful places," said Peter John. "But I thoroughly agree. There is nothing in the world like it. It is a perfect sacrament of a view."

He turned and faced the old man, and,

"Will you please bring me some tea here? I am going to stay forever."

### III

THE foe of humanity and the friend of flowers, the old soldier was an attractive fellow. Peter John thought him quite as good as the view. He also thought his head was very like the head of Julius Cæsar—as the British Museum bust would have it—but, of course, Julius Cæsar rendered a little gauche by the consciousness of the tubular encumbrances of his legs.

With a sigh Peter John took refuge in the serenity of the old man. The face, with its friendly puckers and its curiously lambent eyes, was all kindliness. It showed admirable business acumen on the part of the Southampton estate agents to keep a view like that and an old man like this about premises they wished to let.

He was an extraordinarily amiable old man, too, he thought, to talk like a human being and not like a butler, or any of those determined cockneys who keep their masters in their places in the painted pages of literature.

The old man smiled up at Peter, with the



## GREEN LADIES

equable air of one who could be indulgent toward all jokes he could not understand. He rang the bunch of keys in his hand gently, to show that he possessed the hall-mark of the caretaker. He said:

"You will see the house, sir?"

Peter turned his back to the sea.

"I can see it rather well. I like it. It is a comely house. It is the house of dreams. It has an air, a spirit, a mellowness. It is friendly. It is an old friend whom I have never seen, but who has always wanted me, and I it. I love it. I like it. And I like tea, also—just at present."

He looked at Julius Cæsar.

"Just tea," he protested, "and if your wife grows home-made cakes, little ones, just some of them also. That is, if you have a wife."

The old man smiled at him. Well, yes, that could only mean he had a wife.

"And having a wife," Peter continued, "you must also tell her, I am staying forever. She ought to know that, I think. For there will have to be a bed, and I have to have a fire with my undressing, even in nights like Hampshire's."

The old man smiled again. He could enjoy humor with any one, even when it was beyond him, which is, after all, a very small matter. He ceased to juggle his keys.

## GREEN LADIES

"My wife is making tea now," he admitted. "She thought you would like tea after your ride. It will be brought out as soon as you wish."

Peter was charmed. Admirable husband, admirable wife, he thought, or Latin to that effect.

"But I suppose that is the view," he said to himself. "One naturally lives up to such a view. Or is it the view living up to them? But he stopped thinking like this. It was, indeed, rather like Hilda Lessways asking so many questions of life, that life was far too rushed and breathless to answer them all. So he said to the old man:

"Your wife has a genius, I see. She has a noble appreciation of the appropriate. A woman of smaller stature would have offered me something spiritually false—probably the abomination of the vegetarians, ginger-ale. But tea stamps her. You have just cause for pride in your wife."

The old man's face was uncomprehending, but beautiful.

"She is the best wife," he answered simply.

He turned and beckoned. A window curtain trembled as though nervous, and remained still.

"You can sit here at your tea," said the old man, both explaining and filling the gap. "You can see our view and watch the light go out. There is nothing quite like it—the way the light goes out. It is gentle. You can watch it on the



## GREEN LADIES

Island hills, a lot of colors getting sweet and blurred. And then shadows growing up. They are gentle, too."

A big, youngish old woman carrying a tray, with a tripod table folded and hanging on her arm, came walking from the house while the old man was speaking. He looked towards her and smiled as though he were seeing something exceedingly pleasant for the first time.

"I'm afraid you will not see the house at its best, sir," he ended in warning. "We have electric light, our own power, but there is nothing quite like the sun."

The woman came up. She courtesied to Peter, showing a very bright, alert, quick, smiling old face; Peter told himself that he was hers for all time.

The old man took the tray, and with quick movements the tripod table was before Peter, and the tray with its shining and modest vessels was on the table, while quick, sure hands smoothed out the cloth so flat that it fell in angular folds, that reminded Peter, somehow, of a Russian priest in a new stiff cope.

The old man had bowed once and said:

"This is my wife, sir." But his tone explained, "This is the one perfect thing in the world. Look at it well. It is worthy."

## GREEN LADIES

The woman said nothing at all. She smiled and looked at her man and smiled again. So they stood for a moment, until both turned and looked across the easy sea to the soft hills of the Island.

Peter joined them in their glance. The soft fingers of dusk were coming slowly to the hills, and they had become "gentle" ("What other word could one use?" thought Peter). He could see the sun striking into a plaque of dusty gold a cornfield on the Island slopes.

"When you are ready, sir," the old man said, "I will come out again. I shall see at once when you want me—at once."

Peter administered tea.

"I shall certainly need you. There will be my bed-candle to bring, or is it an electric torch?—I hope not. And perhaps even before that I shall want dinner. Well, something we will call dinner, for I have invaded you without warning. Something with drink and food in it."

Peter said this in a light, nonchalant way, and he kept his eyes on the old woman. How would she take it?

Without a doubt she had a genius. She took it remarkably well. The old man saw that Peter was keeping up the joke, but she saw he was being serious as well. He saw the light come into her face.

## GREEN LADIES

"You *have* taken the place, sir," she breathed, and, "How nice of you to be so pleased," Peter thought.

"It has taken me," he answered. "Though that is the same thing in a lease. I am going to stay here forever, only your husband thinks he will not let me."

The woman looked at her husband.

"Why not, Eden?" she asked.

The old man smiled back at her. He would take her into this joke he could not understand.

"The gentleman has only come over to see the house." He held out the estate agent's permit to view. "Nothing has been settled yet." He turned with a sudden qualm to Peter. "Has it, sir?"

Peter raised his brows.

"I think," he explained to the woman, "I think he means that a number of papers which are wearisome have yet to be put before me, and that lawyers have yet to make me pay money for the privilege of signing my name. As a matter of fact," he said to the old man, "the lawyers and agents and all the King's papers are coming over to-morrow."

The old man fell back a step. He was smiling as ever, only he was smiling better.

"I did not know that, sir. I beg your pardon."

## GREEN LADIES

"Oh, please don't," said Peter. "I did not know it myself ten seconds ago."

Eden frowned. This was something more than a joke he did not understand. The woman spoke at once. She had been watching Peter's face with great attention.

"You will telegraph," she suggested eagerly, "or telephone. You could write even; they will get that to-morrow."

Assuredly, Peter reaffirmed, she had a genius.

"We will telephone," he told her. "And my chauffeur will both take a message and bring all the lawyers your husband would like from Southampton." Peter nodded at them. "That is quite pleasantly settled. . . . And food—my chauffeur can go and steal some, if you tell him what shops to steal from."

The old woman was as cheerful as Peter. She, too, had an adventurous mind.

"I have a young fowl," she brightly told him. "I can give you some sorrel soup, but I think that fish . . ."

"I will think the fish, if that will be more helpful," agreed Peter. "The young fowl and sorrel soup, that is enough for any man."

The old man was not showing the greatest easiness.

"Don't think ill of me, sir," he said. "But I do

## GREEN LADIES

not know whether I would be doing right by Miss Phillippa—or the agents.”

“Miss Phillippa?”

Uneasiness grew upon the old man. He looked at Peter with pleading eyes. He was imploring him not to press the matter too rigorously. His wife stood by watching him. She was a little amused. She knew he had stumbled into an awful hole. She was going to let him remain in it until he stumbled out.

“Miss Phillippa?” asked Peter again.

“It is Miss Phillippa’s house, sir.”

“Then we need not bother about agents. Ask Miss Phillippa to have me go to her. Then we will talk over things. And I will rent the view.”

The old man spread his hands.

“Miss Phillippa is away,” said the old woman briskly, but with no intention of helping her husband out of his fine hole. “She is in a hospital. Nursing, sir.”

“Oh,” said Peter John faintly.

“So you see, sir, . . .” began the old man.

“I don’t,” said Peter John ruthlessly. “Miss Phillippa is not in her house, and wants to let it. I am in her house and am going to take it. We are both where we want to be; we are both attaining our aims. You won’t make us both unhappy, will you?”



## GREEN LADIES

Eden was perplexed.

"Miss Phillippa unhappy—or you, sir? Not for the world. Only it is not usual, sir. And I am supposed to be careful."

Peter laughed.

"Then you had better go for a policeman. My chauffeur will take you to the nearest one. I am going to stay." He turned to the woman. "You'll see I don't die of night air and rheumatics while he is gone?"

The old woman laughed outright in a jolly way.

"Eden, you had best leave things to the lawyers and the agents. They will see to it more cleverly than you. They'll come to-morrow. And a bed is only a bed."

"You had really better give in, Eden," admonished Peter. "You are making all this fuss about a bed which is only a bed."

Eden smiled, mainly to his wife, but Peter John had some of the sun of it.

"The gentleman could have the Chineese room, Eve," he said, with astonishing decision. "That's quite ready. It is always ready; Miss Phillippa likes to feel she can come any time."

"That, and your telephone," said Peter. "I want no more. And my chauffeur, tell him the name of a good inn in the village, and say he must

## GREEN LADIES

be back here at seven o'clock to-morrow. That will help him respect me."

"We have a room," said Eve. "If you would be so kind, sir, we will look after your man."

"I don't think, really, I am the one who is being kind," said Peter, and he turned to his view.

#### IV

**T**HE sun was going out in rose and prim-rose.

The air above the Island was so thin and delicate that it had taken on an interior sheen, as though it were of some fine, silken fabric through which a fair light shone. The Island had become dim. Its mauve had deepened in the shadows to a warm and smoky blueness; the cliffs alone beat out their strange and quivering pink fires. Along the heights of the land a single brushful of glowing color was burning also, outlining the hills. Houses shone like small pale ghosts upon the slopes; in a single window blazed a lonely topaz star of light.

The sea had lost some of its living color, but now Peter could hear it, breathing in its eternal life over the sands of the beach. Where the sun caught it it was flushed and disheveled, as a child sleepy, but not anxious for bed.

The walls of the trees had become dense. They had drawn their dark night-clothes about them already. Only through chance alleys did Peter see



## GREEN LADIES

the last lights of the day, shining as an inlay of jewels in the far, flat distance under the boughs.

The trees were beginning to stir a little, to talk to each other in whispers, in their nightly and tenebrous way. Scarfs of cool air floated through the fragrant mellowness of the expiring day.

Peter felt the touch of their cool breath; he shivered a little.

"Dew means death to me. In the reveries and dampnesses of evening lurks my irrevocable doom—it has been said." He smiled not whimsically but grimly. "And medical boards and pundits in Wimpole Street have said it. Beware of the glammers of *crepuscule*, and its fair but derogatory airs, Peter John," he finished.

And he sat on thinking, a fair target for dew.

The night slipped secretly into the world. The topaz lights of the houses had fled; but there were stars, big, moist, glowing, brimming with light; only a tremble of heaven, he thought, would spill them over. Now the Island was a tender shadow, large against the profound night. Nearer, the massed trees were dense and black. The world was quiet. The earth had fulfilled the labors of the light. It had paused, and, possibly, it, too, was thinking. The quiet was so very still and deep. Only the sea breathed, speaking and speak-

## GREEN LADIES

ing in slurring undertones of the things the heart understands and the tongue cannot utter.

"The land is better than the promise," reflected Peter. The melancholy of *crepuscule* was sinking into him, and he was letting it have its will.

Now, after many weeks, he could be himself. His thoughts could go their own way; his body could relax. His face became a little pinched. His lassitude was telling him the truth better than words of the tongue, better even than thought or sensation.

"This is the place," he told himself. "I won't have to be care-free here. I won't have to preserve my unconquerable pose. I am away from all and everybody who like to bear woes bravely. My head is bloody, and, thank goodness, here I can bow it."

He sat still. He was cold, but for the first time since his wound his melancholy was master of his will.

He tried an old trick for defeating depression. He said with a slightly mocking affection:

"I would like to get out of myself and walk on ten years. What an ass I will think me then. I will see that I worried so much over things so little."

The thought generally reacted with good effect. It gave his life a sense of flat, continuous and co-

## GREEN LADIES

herent existence, as though, after all, he was but the central figure in a novel. He could say to himself, as he could say of the fellow of the novel, "You don't convince me with your *felo de se* airs, my good chap. You are living through crushing tribulations and apparently inextricable complications—but obviously you are going to get out of the tangle. Reflect on that. How are you going to continue through two hundred and fifty pages otherwise?"

He often said this to himself in his mildly ironic tone.

"I know it all looks hopeless, but I have these two hundred and fifty pages of life to live yet. Please wait, Peter John, until the next chapter comes along; you will see in that that there was nothing really to fluster one in this. Life and novels, they must go on, and both straighten things out."

He told himself that now, but the satiric magic of the idea did not release him from the darkness of his heart. The threads of his life had become too much entangled. He had arrived at a point where it was impossible to straighten things out, he felt.

He heard the small sounds of the night, and they were almost nervously clear. He heard the voices of people talking many hundreds of yards

## GREEN LADIES

away, and the sound was intimate. He heard a dog bark, and so monotonously that the brute seemed indulging in a kind of canine vespers. A train roared softly in a mile away; a singular woolly noise, through which a metallic rattling, of the wheels perhaps, stood out brazenly sharp. He heard an automobile very near. It rushed along, and then stopped. The sound was so curiously individual that, had he not known the misleading quality of the night, he would have wagered a pound or so that it had come up the drive to the house. He knew it was not his own car; he knew the song of his own car's engines.

He thought.

"Perhaps some one has hurried himself from the infinite or from Ardrossan to secure the house . . . and I have got in first. How thrilling . . ." He tried to develop the idea. It would not unroll itself whimsically. In any case, what matter; it was but a speculation, while the night was determined to indulge in melancholy facts.

When the night had deepened and the darkness of the trees had blurred into its darkness, the old man came out to him to tell him that dinner was ready.

He followed Eden after a minute's pause. "Grace after enjoyment," he thought, for it

## GREEN LADIES

seemed to him that a man should offer thanks for good views as well as good meals.

Then as he turned and faced the house, its ghostly white beauty came to him and moved him through the darkness of the night. He looked at it.

"I like it. I love it. It's home. . . ." He thought appropriately. Now very quietly, and rather mournfully,

In clouds of hyacinth the sun retires,  
And all the stubble fields that were so warm to him  
Keep but in memory their borrowed fires  
And I, the traveler, break, still unsatisfied,  
From that faint, exquisite, celestial strand,  
And turn and see again the only dwelling-place  
In this wide wilderness of darkening land.

"I wonder whether he'd been here, the fellow who wrote that," considered Peter.

He walked towards the house.

As he walked towards the house standing up with such exquisite pallor in the night, Peter John had the curious feeling that the darkness was peopled. He stopped and looked about him quietly. There was an almost serene blackness everywhere, and he could see nothing in particular. Then, as he looked, it seemed to him that there



## GREEN LADIES

was among the trees some one who stood and watched him.

He was in the light of the door, and light and darkness played tricks with his eyes. But what he saw of the shadowy watcher seemed slim and feminine.

He thought that perhaps he ought to call out. He did not. He decided that the world was large, and other people had a perfect right to stand in the night. True, she stood in the grounds of "Green Ladies," but she could have no less right than himself, and he stood there, too. As he reflected, he was aware that there was no slim shadow under the trees. She had gone. She had slipped out of his sensations of the night as subtly as she had slipped in. Perhaps she had never been there.

"A ghost of fancy—and the best fancies are feminine," he reflected, and went into the house with his thoughts scarcely interrupted.

And presently the sorrel soup and the fowl banished reflection. The fowl, indeed, would not be gainsaid. It had all the virtues of rare and beautiful youth. Where youth is (even in fowls) gray thoughts cannot endure.

His ironic spirit came back to him. He was scornful of his pre-fowl lamentations.

He had, out there in the dark, been recollecting

## GREEN LADIES

a number of things he would never be able to do again, and he had forgotten, of all things, his appreciation of the fundamentals—and a young fowl was one of them.

## V

PETER JOHN dreamed that he was standing on the terrace of "Green Ladies" and that he was drenched in inconsolable mournfulness, and as he stood there was a note of joy from the trees.

He turned to the trees and the slim shadow stood again amid their shadows, and he knew at once that there was waiting a bright and revivifying spirit—and that he must go to her and her song.

And as he watched the slim shadow moved, and he knew he must follow. The dream quickened; he followed the erect and pliant shade along the soft aisles of the pines (unless they were firs), and as he pressed on he knew that beyond there was a world on fire with a golden light of joy. He could see the warm gold of that world burning under the branches of the remotest trees. He could hear through the trees the beat of the sun-washed sea of happiness, and could taste its strong, clean air. He knew that when the furthest of the trees was reached he would see in her per-



## GREEN LADIES

fection this slim, upstanding, and entirely beautiful creature who was leading him on. He would see her in the glory of the light, and would learn how she and the light and happiness were one. There were shadows under the trees, patches of darkness and evil to be passed. The patches were not shade; they were living in their malevolence. They tried to catch his feet, to snare him and to hold him. They tried to catch the moving and elusive creature who passed on before him. But the patches of darkness were overcome. They pressed onwards, and the glory of the light was nearer, shining in his eyes. It was rising, glowing and magnificent upon his face, and his dazzled eyes blinked and shrank before the splendor of its strength. He was assaulted, dazed and captured by it. He shut his eyes.

When he opened them again, he would see the meaning of life and its happiness. . . .

"It is only Eden after all," his mind murmured. "Eden and a window blind; these are the mechanisms of beatific visions."

He blinked at the sunlight Eden had loosed from the window by the magic of the blind.

"You said seven," said Eden, moving the tea tray gently nearer. "If you hadn't said it, I should have let you go on sleeping. You were sleeping so daintily, sir."

## GREEN LADIES

"I approve your magic," Peter John told him. "Or is it Hampshire's? or is it both Hampshire's and yours?" He was conscious that he had slept a night through, the first complete night for many months. That was magic indeed.

"It's the sea air," Eden answered the thing of the mind, rather than Peter's spoken word. "The sea air, and the quiet, they soothe one, sir."

Peter remembered his dream.

"Oh, and the hamadryad, too." Eden looked bewildered. "A hamadryad does go with the lease, doesn't she?" asked Peter, anxiously. "I saw her last night under the trees."

Eden lifted his clear eyes and looked at Peter; Eden's eyes seemed troubled.

"I didn't know you saw any one, sir," he said. He seemed—was Peter right in thinking so?—to be asking not to be questioned too specifically. Peter thought that possibly it would be pleasanter to be ruthless.

"Was there, then, any one to see?"

"I don't know, sir." The voice was troubled. "Who was it you saw?"

"That," insisted Peter, "is for you to tell me. It was just a shadow. It may have been a vision; it may have been a ghost; it was probably a hamadryad. I do not know. You must know."

## GREEN LADIES

Eden put a large, coarse and noble towel on the towel rack.

"I don't know," he said, and Peter knew that from Eden, at least, he would never know. The old man turned to the window. "It's a rare morning, sir. The sun is strong already, the air is soft. Perhaps you would like to bathe, sir. You will not be overlooked at all. And our bathing is notorious, sir. Quite notorious. Such sand, and the water waist-deep almost at once, with a gradual slope after that, never dangerous. The bathing here is beautiful."

He put a swimming suit and a bath robe on top of the noble towel, and he then said, as one holding out a chance of escape to one of weaker flesh,

"Or I will turn on the bath. . . ."

Peter looked through the long windows, finely cruel in their light. There was no haze at all veiling the shining world. The whole earth was vigorous and clear, with that vivid, sharp vivacity that is of music rather than color.

"Or I will turn on the bath," Eden prompted.

"That," cried Peter almost in anger, "that would be a sin crying to the morning for vengeance. It would shame the notorious bathing."

He went out into the day, so young and warm and sharp, and as he went the trees seemed to stir, to catch at each other's hands and call attention

## GREEN LADIES

to him. He could feel the trees looking and laughing, and he felt that they were happy.

"Good morning, trees," he called. "We're all of us much better company to-day. Last night we were in our shadowy mood but we have seen our fairies since."

He looked amid the tree boles, but only the golden light shone through in screens and arabesques of fire. The slim shadow was not there.

## VI

**T**HE shaven paddock sloped delicately seawards, and as Peter went the sea opened out. The paddock ceased, and a low sandy cliff tumbled and scrambled down to the beach. It had a riotous air, the cliff. It could not contain the ardor which made it break madly for the sea.

Peter John went down a jolly path which gamboled in zigzags, that reminded one of a dog frisking before one, down the face of the ridiculous and sprightly cliff. On the beach the warm sand clutched at his feet and came tumbling into his shoes. He kicked his shoes off, pushing his toes luxuriously into the soft, sleek warmth of the beach.

The sun seemed to fill the shore with an immense clean wind, but it was not a wind, since it was moveless.

The light was something alive. It was so quick, so virile. The living sea played with it in a superb morning frolic. The Island, so near last night, so fragrant and imminent, was clearer to see, but

## GREEN LADIES

had stepped back to an austere distance in the morning air. The bay in which he stood had grown infinite also, but with distances clear and sharp as though seen in a mirror. Away to the right was the gorgeous curving sand syncopating itself in the fabulous lagoons and sandpits of the Avon as it played with the sea under Hengistbury Head. To the left the land lifted, but the bay went on in the long sweet line that petered out, a little inanely, on the end of that spit which held Hurst Castle.

And in all this scene the universe was clean and glowing and empty. Peter John had all the world, and all the colors of the world, and all the lights, the airs and the waters of the world for himself alone. He also had the Island, which is a world and a kingdom in itself.

He slipped the bath robe from his strong, lean figure, and stood upright in this arena of emptiness. And he laughed. The whole world amused him.

"Perhaps it's a little overdone," he considered. "Last night I asked for remoteness, but I think, perhaps, I could do with a little less than the entire universe to be lonely in."

The sea is not the place for the melancholy. The sharp, vehement sea has no time for that nonsense. It has no use for delicate and crepus-



## GREEN LADIES

cular thoughts. It has the vigor of honesty and naturalness. Its horseplay and its boisterousness are sane and animal. It does not sympathize with low, gentle manners. It catches a man and jollies him; it wrestles and bullies; like a dog it snatches with its teeth, shakes and worries with a playfulness which has in it a hint of brutal threat.

The sea, as Peter admitted, knocked sense into him. His tumble in its charging and buffeting arms was bracing. It ducked him and tossed him high. It smothered him with an armful of glittering spray. It swung him heavenward; it pushed him giddily, downward, into its deep, smooth and ominous chasms. It let him feel the fine mastery of his own strength; it overawed him with the tremendous ease of its own power. It was a gorgeous rough-and-tumble, this game played before Peter John and the sea—and a game played to the end; even as he came out of the turbulent waters, the sea flung its arms round ankle and knee and thigh and strove to drag him in again with its rough and hearty backwashes.

Peter lay on the sand and panted, and felt crystalline all through. He looked at the sea as one looks at a friend. He knew it was a dangerous as well as a jolly sea, and that any hint of threat it had given was because of himself. He sighed as he realized his own weakness.



## GREEN LADIES

"Will we never be such good friends as we were?" he asked, and he meant by that that he wondered if they would ever be the friends they had been of old, when the play was rougher than it had been this morning. "This silly little thing that didn't fully kill me," he said, "is coming between the sea and me, as it has come between me and all other friendly things."

But that was a thought unfitted to the morning. He stood up.

"What matter! The sun's here, and I have found my paradise now."

He stopped. His fine brows lifted. He looked in astonishment along the beach.

"And, also—Thou?" he asked ironically.

## VII

PETER JOHN looked along the gold-dusty beach, and his brows lifted ironically, interrogatively, perplexedly.

Eden had said he would not be overlooked, he would have a beach from which a Contemplative could bathe. But, perhaps, Eden had been right. Perhaps it was Peter John who had been overlooking.

And perhaps again Eden had only referred to human creatures. This might be the sea-god's daughter, or the wood-fairy; the hamadryad turned, for the moment, into an Undine.

But scarcely an Undine. If an Undine, why a bath robe?

The bath robe lay a splash of bright, moist pigment on the sand. Out of the robe, rising from it, as might a modern Aphrodite, was the—Undine.

She was a great distance away, but the air was so clear he could see her well. A fine, erect, swaying figure, springy and strong like the wand of willow. A figure not of Aphrodite but of Psyche, so slim, so boyish, yet so feminine in its delicate symmetry and its exquisite poise.

## GREEN LADIES

The silken blue of her smooth costume made sure against the sand her breathless comeliness. Peter John tingled with delight at her grace and swiftness of line.

For a moment she stood looking out to sea. Then she lifted her arms in a gesture of lyric abandon. With eager hands she seemed to invoke the joyous companionship of the air and the waters.

And she went to the sea.

Peter thrilled with delight. Such a movement! such a swing and poise and bravura of movement! She strode as a goddess strides free and buoyant in her natural element.

There was a splutter of foam. A rosary of diamonds swung glittering from the waters, and the flash of a white elbow lifted and fell.

Peter John turned and ran for the cliff. A happy accident like this must not be spoiled by any embarrassing suggestion of peeping Tom.

He did not look back. He felt that he would not need nor feel any presence in that enchanted spot but the sea and the sun and the air. And she must not.

"And I thought she was a wood fairy," he sneered to himself. "I can only think of wood fairies when it is the immortal daughter of nymph Endelechia herself."

## VIII

PETER JOHN sat back from the bright litter of silver and porcelain and food and telegrams which had made his breakfast.

He had already asked of Eden:

"Is there such an expression as house-napping, do you think? Even if there isn't, I am a house-napper, and I will be one for several hours yet. The lawyer, by telegram, tells me he will not be here until three, and the agent, over the telephone, says he will come with the lawyer."

Breakfast was in a serene Jacobean room, and the room was at the front of "Green Ladies." It was a chamber quite worthy. The leisurely and spacious adventure of breakfast is, by divine right and usage, only justly accomplished in Jacobean surroundings. One may lunch in Queen Anne; one may even, if one likes, plunge deeply into the gilded table d'hôteries of café Louis Quinze, but one must breakfast Jacobeanly if one values the holy purpose of the meal.

The Jacobean room was, as it should be, nar-

## GREEN LADIES

row rather than large. With its placid oak and its copper and its long pencils of windows and the deep mauve curtains at them, its green tapestried walls and its minimum of pictures, it possessed the lean, bright, simple air of comfort which gives the braced composure fitted for the beginning of days.

There are rash people who, criminally, breakfast amid surroundings only to be described as syncopated-Victorian. These people have never yet understood why their lives are pointless and bewildered.

If a man begins his day with complications, he has only himself to thank if his life is futile. Peter was able to see this irrefutably, and he meditated upon the truth. He began to recognize how men, and through them the destinies of the world, were controlled by breakfasts.

He reconstructed the breakfast parlors of Christendom. He saw finance rearing in crushing and overburdening power from the mahogany and doylies of a myriad implacably proper homes. He had appalling visions of the breakfast environments of the men who write for *Revue*s.

Beyond this he dared not go.

The windows of this room were tall and narrow. They did not look towards the sea. Their view enfolded the drive and the calm lawns about

## GREEN LADIES

it. He could look beyond the scattering of trees strung across the lawns, away to where, in a distant soft blur of leaves, the fringes of the New Forest stood up against the sky.

Peter smoked and regarded the view. It was vivid with white and blue and green and gold, and so poignantly clear that it filled him with a stinging pleasure. And he thought of the view as one who would presently own it. It would be his. He would rent it in its frames of windows, in the same way as he might rent other masterpieces. It was strange that very few house agents entered in their inventories, "twenty very good window pieces of tree and sky; frequent white clouds on same."

As he regarded the view he could paint upon it the attractive changes of the months. The gold and brown of autumn and the mauve and gray of the year's ending. He was very glad he had entered "Green Ladies" like a thief in the night. It was his by right of capture and desire.

As his mind dwelt upon all the attractions of the house, he remembered the shade amid the tree and the vision of the beach.

He said to Eden, who had the comforting habit of being inconspicuously present at the moments when he was needed,



## GREEN LADIES

"Does any alien from Olympus live next door to me, Eden?"

The old man stopped doing whatever he was doing. By now he had come to see that Peter John was pleasant, if inexplicable. Also, if one stood and looked receptive, sense would come in time.

"You mean, sir?" he prompted with his smiling patience.

Peter John referred to the telegrams.

"Very well, then, we will be precise, since you insist on it. After 3:30 to-day—I don't suppose the most inveterate estate agent or the most rock-bottom lawyer can be more than half an hour letting what they want to let to a tenant who means to be a tenant. After 3:30 this afternoon, shall I have a goddess for my next door neighbor?"

Eden went back to the service table.

"Mrs. Waymsley is next to us—Milton way, sir." He answered, and perhaps it was a fancy of Peter's but he thought the answer reticent. Who was it—Talleyrand, eh?—had told Eden that speech was given one for the purpose of saying nothing?

"Sure, Eden? I don't remember that name among the ratepayers of Olympus."

"Olympus, sir?"



## GREEN LADIES

"A figure of speech. Olympus is the place where those that the gods love come from. Mrs. Waymsley—do you think that sounds God-beloved?"

Eden gave it up. He knew what Olympus was. It was the place where, before the war, London exhibitions were held. How old Mrs. Waymsley had ever been an exhibition was beyond him.

"The name of Mrs. Waymsley's house, sir, is 'Milton Little.' She is old, and she is very good. She has lived there since all the time I have known."

Peter John gazed at Eden's Delphic back.

"And the land towards the Avon, does Mrs. Waymsley live on that, too?"

Eden was silent.

("You're trying to rake up some Talleyrandish trickery," Peter inwardly commented.)

"No," answered Eden, as one who had given the matter the deepest thought. "General Sir Fraser Hensley's place is in that direction, sir, but he is not in residence. He is still soldiering, sir."

"You haven't helped a bit," cried Peter John. "The world is thrilling with secrets, and you put me off with generals."

Eden removed plates a trifle nervously; but he remained determinedly inscrutable.

"For example," continued Peter deliberately,

## GREEN LADIES

"there's this young woman you keep about the place. A young woman, Eden, flaunting herself."

Eden breathed sharply.

"Sir," he gasped.

"Yes," said Peter eagerly. Was revelation coming?

"What young lady?" said Eden, after a fearful pause.

"It is your young miss; what have you to say about her?"

Eden glanced with his quick, bright, his appealing, Cæsarine eyes towards Peter. He looked down at the plate in his hand.

"I don't know, sir. But there is no young lady about the place. Mrs. Eden and me—there is no one else here."

"Here," jeered Peter, "here is a subterfuge. When I said about the place, I meant about it, part of it, part of its air and color. Part of its shadows, too, under the trees—by the way, are they firs?"

"Pines, sir."

"Part of the sunlight and the sea and the beach too, Eden. She is the essence of all appropriate places. A hamadryad last night, a nereid this morning at the edge of the sea. Who is she, Eden?"

## GREEN LADIES

Out of this skein of fantasy Eden clutched at the fact of sex.

"You mean you saw a young person, sir, about the grounds?" Was Eden temporizing? Peter did not know. The worst of the Cæsarine features are that they can make a Sphinx out of even the ingenuous.

"Saw is not quite the word, not for all my singular experience. Say, rather, I felt her last night. And I dreamed of her, too, I think, but you may not consider that direct evidence. But this morning she was authentic. She bathed, Eden, and quite real people do that."

"Bathing," breathed Eden, and he seemed flustered. "She bathed . . . a visitor, no doubt."

"What, here? In this house?"

"Not in the house, sir. Where did you see the young lady?"

"On the beach. Oh, well, towards the Avon." Eden stared at Peter.

("You are lost, my boy," said Peter. "You are cornered. You don't know what in the world to say.")

But Peter did.

"There may be visitors at General Hensley's," he said, as though reflecting, "or somewhere else—at the village."

"That is all very lame, Eden. A visitor. Any-

## GREEN LADIES

body can be a visitor. Very few people can be a hamadryad. At least you might have made it more attractive—are you determined it must be that?"

"It sounds like a visitor."

"And it looked like a nereid," sighed Peter. "Oh, and a hamadryad. And she is perhaps merely—no, we won't probe too deeply into these mysteries. She might turn out to be Mrs. Mac-Stinger."

## IX

**A**N attractive hour was spent studying, by sunlight, the ground floor of the house, his house by right of ruthlessness.

He had determined to take the house yesterday, for no more reason than that it had called to him, had fitted its moods to his moods. It was like faith, which one accepts in a flash, which is, then, indubitably and illogically ours forever. Between the saddle and the ground, as it were, Peter had known that "Green Ladies" must be his. It was, however, satisfying to his sense of comfort to find that "Green Ladies" was also a place in which he could live.

There were many rooms on the ground floor, and all were comely.

Near the breakfast room was a study on the side away from the sea. Not an obtrusive sort of study, not a room that hectored and intimidated one into labor; a place for the mind almost more than a place for filling up Income Tax assessment forms and the labors of life.

There were big meditative chairs in the room.

## GREEN LADIES

The sort of chair that makes one say spontaneously, "Well, I'll sit down and think this out." And one did, until the gong went, and one said, "Why, that's lunch. I'll leave it until the afternoon." Attractive chairs. There was a low, wide, club curb before the fire. A grate that could accommodate logs. There were big windows and an overwhelming light. If one must work then it could be done with a fine sense of austerity and intellectuality at a vast, flat, gilt and rosewood table-desk. The surface was of green leather, and on it were faint, half-obliterated gold lines, so faint that they appeared rather a fragrance than a fact. The electric light on the desk had a dark green tapestry shade, and that was nice of it.

A few books of utilitarian texture, but not of dismaying usefulness, were in low bookcases between the windows. The Encyclopædia Britannica, the book that one must always have about one, and one's friends sometimes use, was there, and in the India paper edition, a binding and format even more attractive to handle than to read. There were the other books that one ignored save at moments of crisis—like the Postal Guide—and then took to one's bosom with a rapture never even given by the devotee to Ethel M. Dell. And Peter thanked God there were no bound volumes of the *Country Gentleman* or *Badminton*.



## GREEN LADIES

The study allowed one into the library, which led out of it. Not a big library, but a comforting one. There were, naturally, since libraries are only human, quite a number of those richly bound books which are born to go on to shelves as permanent fittings and to remain there for all time untouched. There were real books, too.

Peter poked about among the names, and was glad that somebody else had the courage of modernity. Peter himself was one of those incapable of feeling that the best authors, like good men, were all dead. He found virtue in the living. So had the maker of the library. He found himself saying, "How d' you do?" to all his old companions from G. K. Chesterton and Romain Rolland and Wells, Hergesheimer and O. Henry and Barry Pain.

He made attractive discoveries, as one does in a library which has a heart and not merely affectations. The library maker evidently enjoyed the books he enjoyed. The library maker evidently liked Frederick Rolfe, and C. C. Martindale—well, the "Goddess of Ghosts," side of C. C. Martindale was there, and "Orpheus in Mayfair" and not Oscar Wilde. When Peter also found an attractive blank where Henry James should be, he felt he must cry out. "How nice of you. We were born to be friends."



## GREEN LADIES

Peter also admired the way the books had been treated. The library maker had deposed the original covers, and had bound the volumes in glowing, agate-colored leather. A soft leather which gave a joy to the hands as to the eyes and heart and mind.

The chairs in the library were the "just chairs." They enfolded the body in every contortion of reading. There was a chesterfield and a narrow but long, bare oak table. The carpet was red and untortured by design. There were small electric lamps that one could carry about on their strings, and since there were these lamps, there were a number of those humble-looking and obedient shelves meant to support lamps. The room was bright and warm and saturated with a sort of benignant serenity.

In the center of the house there was a big open chamber that was neither a room nor a hall, but something of both. One came into it from the main door (that is, from the New Forest side), one could walk from it directly into the garden and down to the sea. It also led into the drawing-room, which ran along one side of the garden, and into the dining-room, which did exactly the same thing, but along the other side.

As it stood it was a large, charming open space, obviously consecrated to music. A big grand

## GREEN LADIES

piano was placed there, and a number of those screens which seem, somehow, appropriate to music, were standing about idle. There was also a spinet: there should have been a spinet, and there was one; it was exactly right. Screens and carpet and chairs and hangings and settee were rose-colored, though the furniture had lapses into gilt. It was something more than a lounge and something less than a room.

"I am baffled, but I will sit in you often," said Peter.

The two rooms of pomp and circumstance, the drawing and dining rooms, were austere and comely. The young man regarded them, admired, and looked out of doors.

"But I admire the sunlight more just now," he decided.

He found his stick and cap and passed down the steps from the music room into the sunlight of the terrace.

## X

**O**N the terrace he stood for a moment looking over the bright filament of sea towards the Island.

The Island had drawn off a little as the sun had risen, but it had become more emphatic in outline and color. Its flanks had taken on those hard, flat tints—polished and striking—that sometimes attract one in glossily enameled toys.

Just now the Island did look like a large and enjoyable toy. It was obvious that this view was to be one of constant change and emotion, and Peter recognized that it was ready to distract him by a thousand moods.

He sighed a little. He would need all his distractions, he knew. When he had come on to the terrace a tiny wave of depression had beat in upon him again. It defied analysis, of course, but there was no blinking at the melancholy drag of it, nor the lassitude that it brought with it. For a moment he was a prey to the weariness that comes to a mind which realizes that its position is hopeless and that the future will be empty.

## GREEN LADIES

"Even if I take this house—and the views," he considered, "will they help? Can I escape? Won't I be shutting myself in? Will this attractive place, and these jolly views, and the sea and the beach, and the air, too (with pines), help me at all? Won't they become familiar; even part of me; conspirators in melancholy?"

He looked at the Island. The shadows of two small clouds chased across the bashing water, ran up the shining slope of the Island hills, and slipped over the top. They were swift, mercurial shadows, intensely dark as they passed over the bright surface of sea and land, but they seemed to leave sea and land more vividly, more poignantly bright, as though they had scoured the world afresh. Peter watched the shadows until they had leapt from view over the sky-line.

"Am I to believe in omens?" he wondered. "And, in any case, why two of them?"

He turned to go down the terrace steps and saw Eve Eden.

## XI

**H**E had actually been conscious of Eve Eden for some little space.

He had seen her come out on the terrace, but since terraces and the sunlight were large enough for many, he had given her no more than a subconscious how-d'y-do.

Abruptly, as one feels the prick of love, or solves a problem in mental arithmetic, a blazing instant of absolute lyrical certainty, he knew she had come out to speak to him.

She was watching him with an eye both eager and diplomatic. Peter saw this from the corner of his, noted her particular attitude. She was resolved to speak to him, but she was also resolved that he must think this maneuver casual, unpremeditated, accidental.

Peter was certain that this was the reason for her bold yet hovering air. He wondered why a creature so clear and benignant should fall into subterfuge. Was it that she was conspiring for his happiness—a condition that makes most mortals guilty? Or had her air that “something” in it which had been unfathomable in Eden.



## GREEN LADIES

"Well," thought Peter, "we will subject you to the test of 'gnawing' anxiety!"

So he ignored her. He strolled amiably and unconsciously (he hoped) down the steps. He walked away from her—but not too rapidly. "Will this unmask you, Eve?" he asked.

At the bottom of the short flattish flight he hesitated. Which way should he go in his assumed unconsciousness? To the left through the firs (oh, but, yes, they were pines) towards this "Milton Little," or to the right in the direction of the Avon, and in the direction of the Ner—well, in that direction.

As he hesitated, wasn't he right in thinking that Eve waited with a sort of anxiety, a breathless, intangible, almost imperceptible anxiety? It was a shade too delicate to be emphatic, in a moment too swift. For, instinctively, he turned towards the Avon.

In that instant the shade, if it had been a shade, which Peter had fancied to be on Eve's face, had passed. He looked up at her quickly as he turned. She was perfectly, bafflingly, usual.

"What jolly trap of yours have I tumbled into?" Peter thought, and he was half inclined to swing round and dare "Milton Little" and all the Waymsleys that dwelt therein.

Eve looked down on him, smiling in her serene

## GREEN LADIES

and equable way. He could see that this fine morning weather joined them in a sodality of joy. She smiled, but she did not attempt to speak. Peter reconsidered her as a plotter. Perhaps, after all, he was a little too prone to suspicion. As a concession he felt bound to speak himself.

"Please tell me that I have been clever. Is this the best direction for my walk?"

"It's all along by the water, sir, an' you can see it shining through the trees," she told him.

"And the other way?" asked Peter, testing her. "Is it as pretty?"

"Wonderful pretty, sir," she answered, and Peter asked himself, "What do I make of that?"

"But you suggest this?"

"It is a sweet walk. You go down alongways towards the sea always, sir. Nothing will be in front of you but the big sea. An' such a pretty path, weavin' through the woods an' the brambles all along the little tumbled cliff."

"I can't resist any cliff that tumbles," agreed Peter, recalling the jolly of this morning.

"Always along the edge of the sea it goes," insisted Eve.

"Nor can I resist the sea. It is your path I follow."

"Yes, sir, do, do," she cried eagerly.

And Peter was suspicious again. Was she real-



## GREEN LADIES

ly devoted to beauty? Wasn't there some benevolent chicanery behind her eagerness? Benevolent it must be. Assuredly Eve Eden only committed good against her neighbor.

And then he had cast the die. He was already moving along the path she desired. "It is obviously for my good," he thought, and he struck out towards the Avon.

## XII

EVE EDEN stood, five minutes later, before the frowning gorge of the telephone. After speaking more intimately than wisely to a butcher in Bournemouth, and a Serbian colonel somewhere east of Christchurch, such is the Puckish whim of telephones, her ear encountered an authentic, an intimate inflection, and she cried in a gentle fluster,

“Lamby!”

Then after a moment,

“Is it you, Lamby?”

And then after three moments,

“It is all right.”

And again after thirty-two moments,

“Yes, it *is* quite all right, Lamby. It is as we arranged.”

She hung up the telephone. She stood looking at the instrument as one going over the whole dialogue, to make sure that she had said every word in the right manner, the unmistakable manner. She left the instrument with reluctance, but she carried with her a smile of jolly craftiness that put a sun into all her doings of the morning.

### XIII

PETER walked the way of the path that fringed the world by the lip of the sea. The truth was with Eve. It was an attractive walk.

Peter went down through the gem-like garden, keeping steadily to the right after the manner of the good young man in a moral book. He passed between the spilt colors of the flowers, went through a wicket in the derogatory iron fence, crossed the paddock, and plunged into the clean, sub-acid shadows of the trees.

Tall laurels, dark and polished, made a gate for a path that followed an errant course to the west. He walked between the heavy foliage of the laurels, and along their dark walled avenue, and at once, and magically, Eve was no more, "Green Ladies" was no more, nor anything of this human world. Just twenty steps from the garden and he was in the heart of solitude.

He stood feeling emptiness about him like still water. He looked aloft to where the pines sprang high against the sky. He saw their heads

## GREEN LADIES

bowing gently, and felt the curious reticence of their silent movement. He saw, above their canopied leaves, the heavens slipping swiftly by, as the world rushed on in space. Of course it was only the uncelestial clouds rushing on in space, but so mighty was this enormous, soundless swiftness that clouds would not do. It had to be a world on the rush or nothing.

It was silent and empty in this little path, a million miles from disturbance. Yet it was the singular silence that is full of sound, and that superb emptiness that is full to overflowing.

He heard the deep breath of the wind through the leaves, and behind the wind he heard the distant, muffled and eternal beating of the sea.

He walked on.

Presently the laurels gave way, and only the pillared masts of the trees stood between him and the sea. The curious reddish tone, made up of the trunks and the cone-strewn sand, accented in poignant manner the flashing blue of the waters. The sea, again, seemed a shining panel upon which the exquisite pine masts had been strongly but delicately massed. "It is like," thought Peter, "it is very like a picture by a Futurist, who had suddenly been afflicted with a sense of beauty."

Pressing through the trees, strong and untiring and dominant like the sea its brother, came the

## GREEN LADIES

sea wind. It was not jolly and rough like the sea. It pushed determinedly against Peter with an even and virile pressure, which gave him a sense of exultance as he conquered it and made his way forward in spite of it.

The trees thinned slowly, and he came on to the path that ran up and down in odd and jerky levels, as it followed the edge of a cliff that would persist in breaking away at intervals towards the beach beneath. The Island was now behind his shoulder. Before him was the immense floor of the ocean and the intaglio of lagoons that fretted the beach below Christchurch.

Peter walked along evenly, enjoying every step. It seemed to him that the world was more full of sunlight than it could possibly hold. It brimmed over. It splashed over in abundant and exhilarating wantonness. It was in the land and the trees, in the sea and the sky, the whole world was sun.

He told himself that, no, he was not actually happy, but he was bathed of delight. He had not lost his sense of realities; he knew what he was and what life meant for him; he remained as he was, but even as he was he had become part of the sunlight.

"Even the hopeless can take a part in this magnificence, and without losing their hopelessness."

## GREEN LADIES

He looked about him, sweeping with his glances the wide and shining world.

"And yes," he said softly, "I suppose that was the one thing necessary. The final touch to the morning—the culminating note in the sunlight."

He kept his eyes steadily ahead.

Coming towards him along the narrow cliff path was the slim, light moving figure of a woman.



#### XIV.

THE woman came along the cliff. She moved with a slow serenity, yet with a sense of luxury which suggested that she felt that sunlight like this was a rare vintage to be tested and enjoyed by every fiber of her being and every movement of her body.

There was no denying her poise. Her singular grace was apparent even through her indolence, a sort of sumptuous languidness which formed so baffling and yet so feminine a contrast to the almost ruthless vigor of the morning's youth on the beach. There was no doubt about her at all. Peter knew her. She was the sea maiden strolling in human semblance along the margin of the waters, and,

"In ten minutes," he told himself, "in ten minutes we'll be facing each other on a path only reasonable for one. In ten minutes there will occur a little drama of politeness. Only it won't be a drama of politeness; it will be nothing less than a crisis in human existence. We will be fundamentally and inexpressibly absurd. We will



## GREEN LADIES

pretend we do not exist. I shall step aside, and she will walk through my vacuum, as though there was nothing human within a thousand miles of her. I, too, will have a thousand-miles-away air."

He glanced at her, and she was very near. There was no mistaking her. Peter did not want to mistake her. He wanted, in fact, to know her.

"And, of course, I cannot. We shall stubbornly ignore the fact that each of us is here. I shall be less than the sunlight and the trees. Conceivably, if I were a tree, she would be rather more interested in me than as I am as a human. She would say, 'Oh, there is a hornbeam. How nice and gnarly you are.' But she can't tell a human being he is nice and gnarly, though, quite probably, he can be more gnarly than any hornbeam. We have been raised above the trees by the gift of speech. We are forbidden to talk. I shall—but I shall loathe—standing aside and looking through her to the limits of the Atlantic Ocean. I shall hate being an upright pillar of nothing by her wayside."

He walked on. He watched her moving, upright and firm against the bright, poignant background of the sea and the air.

"How sumptuously she moves. Only the woman who went to the sea this morning in just this morning's manner could walk like that. . . . and

## GREEN LADIES

we are so conspicuous. We're the only two fragments of animation in all this huge emptiness. We really can't avoid knowing each of us is about. It's fatuous. Even the trees are friendly. Those poplars now, I'll warrant they don't stand on ceremony, yet I've to be mum."

He glanced up again. The nearness of the girl filled him with thrills both of pleasure and of fear.

"But I won't be mum. I want to know her and I will know her. I'll stop. I'll speak. I'll say—what shall I say? I'll step aside and I'll—but what shall I do? What can one say? What does one do?"

He frowned at his lack of spirit. "How absurd are human limitations! The mind ought to manage a little affair like this quite easily. I should produce the apt accident, the irresistible remark. And—and it merely vamps up an idea about the climate. How can I possibly win her attention by telling her the weather is fine?"

("Now," his mind shouted to him, "decide quickly. She is here.")

"Mercy," he stammered mentally. "But what—but how?"

("She's level . . . in a moment she'll be past.")

"I'll ask her the way—absurd as it is, I'll ask her the way; there is nothing else."

## GREEN LADIES

He stepped off the little sandy track that strung itself like a thread of gold wire across the grass. He stepped off, made a stride, remembered that he must be commonplace or be forever silent, swung half round, hesitated, yawned. . . .

And the woman stopped. She stopped and she smiled, tilting her head in a manner inquiring, attentive, yet somehow suggesting a secret fund of amusement, and she said,

"It is straight on."

## XV

IT is straight on," she had said, and her voice was crisp, melodious, cool, yet with an undeniable point. There was distinction in it, an air of capability; she was mistress of herself, and yet in her tone there was something of laughter, an undercurrent giving it an attraction, a touch of friendliness.

And she was standing and looking at him. The unexpected, the incredible had happened. She had stopped; she was looking at him with her cool, slightly amused glance; she was willing to talk.

Peter, never so little taken aback, yet plucking up heart at this unthought-of miracle, rallied his wits. Then, with something of her own smiling spirit, "It always is," he said. "There is an inevitableness about roads. But how did you know?"

"There is no other way. Anything or everywhere it is straight ahead."

She smiled, not at all perturbed, not at all self-conscious. She had stopped. She was regarding

## GREEN LADIES

him in that attitude of half-arrested motion which seems to say, "I'm merely idling. I don't mind stopping and exchanging commonplaces—if you do commonplaces nicely."

Peter recognized the attitude. He recognized her quickness, her vivacity, her complete assurance. He saw this as readily as he realized that all he had imagined of her slim, crisp beauty was a pale flame beside the warm fire of the reality. He told himself that his luck was amazing. "She doesn't mind talking. She doesn't mind at all." And he remarked aloud,

"I suppose I did appear transparent."

"Weren't you just a little transparent?" she answered, and there was the merest fleck of mockery in her quick glance, a starlight of raillery, good-tempered, indulgent.

"Well, yes—I think I was," he admitted recognizing she had seen through him, had understood his desire to stop and talk. "But then I wanted to share the day. It seems a unique day. It is too large and radiant to keep all to oneself."

She examined the sea and the sky with a friendly glance.

"It is an abounding day," she admitted.

"Isn't it?" Peter cried quickly. "You see that too. One feels bound to share it. One *must* share things; human nature is gossip nature; oh,



## GREEN LADIES

and every sort of nature feels that way, too. Look at the trees, those poplars, now. How they *do* button-hole the wind. See how they nod their bugles and their jet beads in their eternal chatter with the airs."

"Oh, the poplars," she reflected coolly, turning in a movement undeniably youthful and springy. "But don't you think you might be wrong about the poplars? Do you think the day really interests them? Isn't it rather the old *idée fixe* of theirs? Aren't they telling the wind that if they had their rights, if the heavenly jury had not been wrongly directed on that day when they were accused of stealing Jove's spoons, they'd still be leaving their cards on the best people of Olympus? The god would not have changed them into trees, and they would not be hobnobbing with, say, those scoundrelly elms."

Peter examined the poplars. That is, he had the poplar-examining attitude, but all the time the corner of his eye was taking her in, enjoying that curious, slim, strong beauty of her, noting the pointed, yet witty, alluring face. Then,

"You think it's that?" he queried. "You think they are permanently soured? To have become poplars—at a moment's notice too—just because some portable property strayed, as quite good spoons will, into one's pocket, no doubt that would

## GREEN LADIES

warp one. But don't you think that even the permanently discontented might be betrayed into pleasure by this sun and this air and this breeze?"

"No," she answered, "no, people with a grievance do not see the sun."

"Oh—but surely," he protested, startled at her Calvinistic certainty, "won't you even allow them lapses into happiness?"

She reflected, her clear smile fading in the shadow of her thoughts. "No, not even sometimes. If they did, then theirs is not a grievance. Not the real, full-blooded, soul-destroying grievance. To have a real and indestructible discontent, one has to ignore any good in the world. One must turn inwards, away from the temptations of light. One must be self-supporting, self-consuming; days like this will be poison to one's appetite for unhappiness. No, if you see the sun in the heaven, all's not so wrong with the world."

Peter John looked at her astonished. Did she know him, then, or of him? Had he been pointed out to her in the world to which they both so obviously belonged? Had she heard something about him—his disappointment, his sense of frustration? Was she, by an oblique method, pointing a moral? Certainly he had reason to be astonished; he thought that, though his illness was public property, his melancholy was his own. He



## GREEN LADIES

regarded her, and said, not showing his thoughts, "You speak in tones of authority."

She looked out towards the wide, glittering floor of the sea, and he saw for the first time that there was a note of wistfulness, a note of sadness in her bearing.

"Why not?" she answered, almost in a whisper. "Why not? Only last night I said in my heart, 'There is no sun!'"

Peter, more startled than ever, stared at her.

Not himself, but herself had been the reason for her little pointed moralizing. He had made the stupidest of mistakes. He told his mind, "Truly I have the worst type of grievance. I turn inward. I think only of myself." And before he could formulate any adequate answer, she had turned on him once more; facing him with the tiniest grimace, half laugh, half self-reproof.

"See where the poplars have led," she cried.

"Or the road," Peter said lamely. "It leads anywhere and everywhere, you know."

"And we went nowhere. Only inside ourselves, the *cul de sac* of happiness." She made a tentative step forward; she was resuming her stroll. Peter's senses cried in alarm. "And you—you have yet to reach anywhere." She finished in a manner to suggest that this rounded off their dialogue.

## GREEN LADIES

He felt inclined to call, "But I prefer your Nowhere." He would have preferred anything that would keep her there, talking in the sun and by the sea, if only for a space. He would play any trick on her to that end. And he played one. He said,

"I'm afraid I have now to confess myself a fraud. What I wanted you to tell me was not the way to anywhere, but the enormous distance to anywhere. I wanted you to say that in getting there I would become, delectable as the day is, hot and uncomfortable, that undoubtedly I would be late for lunch."

She arrested that movement, which was yet but the dawn of motion; gave him her full face, smiled with a gentle, interrogative lifting of brows, then,

"It is an enormous distance to anywhere," she said portentously. "You will get hot and uncomfortable, and undoubtedly you will be late for lunch."

"Thank you very much," said Peter John politely. "You have bolstered up my infirmity of purpose. I won't go there. I can't be late for lunch. Not that I mind, but Eve Eden would be desolated."

He looked at her closely as he spoke the name. Under that test, he thought, she must betray

## GREEN LADIES

herself as a tripper (a beautiful one, yet for all that a tripper), or as one indigenous to the place. Her answer clinched the matter; she was not, as Eden had endeavored to suggest, a visitor.

"I'm afraid I must pour cold water on your altruism. Eve Eden will not be desolated."

"You think not?"

"She will bear up under anything."

"Oh, you know Eve Eden as well as that?"

"I've known her for a hundred years. And you?"

"Not quite so long. In fact not half so long. She has only lately become my housekeeper."

Whatever had been the girl's intention, she checked altogether at this remark. She showed him a face, bewildered, pretty, agnostic, even amused in a startled way, as he had intended she should.

"Eve Eden your housekeeper," she cried. "But surely—has Eve Eden left 'Green Ladies'?"

"Oh, no," said Peter, slyly enjoying himself. "Oh, no, of course not. But why should she?" He hoped his own air of bland surprise was not overdone.

"If Eve Eden has not left 'Green Ladies,' then——"

"Oh, I have taken 'Green Ladies,' " Peter mentioned airily, casually, his manner saying with a

## GREEN LADIES

sort of discreet wonderment, "But hadn't you heard? Where have you been then? Didn't you know that some one had come down from London, and poked about and made inquiries, and all that? And that there had been lawyers and traffickings and coming and goings, and big vans and movings in . . . ? What could have been the matter with you not to have noticed all this fuss?"

The girl took in his manner, and her little adorable chin lifted, and the amusement which had been growing in her eyes burst into a little flash of laughter.

"Oh, you have taken 'Green Ladies,'" she cried. "And I didn't know. How stupid of me. And Eve Eden and Eden himself—you have taken them too."

"To be truthful," said Peter, "they took me. And perhaps the house did, also. The combination seemed perfect."

"'Green Ladies' is thought to be the most attractive house in these parts," said the girl, again with that gravity that seemed the gravity of laughter. "But am I saying something already old; you have become accustomed to its attraction, perhaps?"

"Well, no," said Peter, after due thought.

## GREEN LADIES

"Every day I find a novelty, a charm about the place. But you know it and like it too?"

"Yes and no," said the girl, but with a touch of sobriety in her voice. "It has its charm—but there were disappointments, too. But its beauty is undeniable. You know the German Emperor is said to have been angry with it."

"Merciful heavens, why?"

"He visited Hampshire, as you know, but he was given another house. Quite a beautiful house. He thought it the most beautiful in the county until some one showed him 'Green Ladies,' after that he thought 'Green Ladies' presumptuous."

They had, by mutual impulse, begun to walk slowly back in the way he had come, in the way she was going. He laughed at her small sally, and then he said:

"There must be facts more interesting about 'Green Ladies' than emperors and their angers. It looks a house that had known and had stored within it many things."

She walked a little way, and now she stopped.

"Yes," she said reflectively, "it has its stories."

Peter John had paused with her. He did not speak. He looked at her. Perhaps she would tell him some of its stories. Her eyes, which had been resting upon the sea and the glowing



## GREEN LADIES

mass of the Island set in the sea, came back to him, and at once the gossamer of reverie which had rested upon her face was swept away, by the vivacious, the brave undercurrent of amusement which seemed ever at her command. "And meanwhile," she said, "there are lunches to eat. You must not desolate your housekeeper, even in theory, while I dare not desolate mine in fact." She nodded to where a faint track passed lightly backward over the grass to a kissing gate in a hedge. "That is my way," her nod seemed to say.

Peter John saw that the track continued across the field beyond the hedge, though it quickly twisted out of view. And he saw more than that. He saw the upper windows of a low house, a house with the ripe, mellow tone of a true Hampshire chalk wall, set under a deep, slanting, fading straw thatch. The house had the air of a cottage, and yet was obviously larger than a cottage. Peter glanced from the house to the faint path. "That is the way she came down to the sea this morning," he decided.

The girl looked up towards the house. She seemed to hesitate a little before she decided to trace her steps towards it.

"I am not far from my housekeeper," she



## GREEN LADIES

said, almost, it seemed, as though weighing her words, "that is my house."

"And I am not really very far from my house-keeper, either," admitted Peter, "though mine, it seems, is the less intimidating. 'Green Ladies' is only a short distance. We are really neighbors in this enchanted land," and then he added, as though to balance the fact that she had let him into the secret of her home, "my name is John, Peter John."

She nodded a "Yes, we are neighbors," nothing more, and with that adieu walked along the lightly marked track to her home.

"All the same," Peter John reflected, "I haven't found out who you are. To your other names, to hamadryad, nereid, MacStinger, and the rest must be added that of enigma."

## XVI

THE girl who was at times a hamadryad and on occasion an enigma poured cream over fruit salad. She looked across the dark, glowing, mellow oak, and the crystal shine and sparkle of the luncheon table, and said coolly, casually, to the young woman of sixty-six who sat opposite,

"Well, I have met the new owner of 'Green Ladies.' "

The young lady of sixty-six lifted an amiable, jolly and worldly face; her clear-polished, her humorous human eyes snapped astonishment; her slightly Roman, yet high and aristocratic, nose twitched in an amused and eager curiosity.

"My dear, the *new* owner of 'Green Ladies'? What new owner?"

"Well, if you will have it precisely," said the girl, as if anxious to be accurate, "the new tenant of 'Green Ladies.' "

"That's no easier," said the young woman of sixty-six. "Doesn't a place have to be let before one talks of its tenant?"

The girl raised her brows in whimsical sur-

## GREEN LADIES

prise. "Of course," she admitted, "but 'Green Ladies' boasts a tenant. But 'Green Ladies' is let."

Her tone said with the same discreet wonderment Peter John had employed not two hours earlier, "But hadn't you heard? Where have you been? Didn't you know that some one had come down from London, and poked about and made inquiries, and all that? And that there had been lawyers and traffickings and comings and goings and big vans and movings in . . . ? What could have been the matter with you not to have noticed all that fuss?"

The young lady of sixty-six jerked her little felt hat backward in a movement of laughter and appreciation.

"Well," she said, in her vivacious way, "well—your bomb has gone off nicely. 'Green Ladies' boasts a tenant. 'Green Ladies' is let. Well——?"

"A personable, distinguished tenant," said the girl calmly, and yet with her attractive, intimate disarming smile; "distinguished, certainly; reasonably tall, a good carriage. He is slim, and he wears his clothes well. You, no doubt, would call him good looking."

"I'd have less doubt if I saw the young man," said the young woman of sixty-six.

## GREEN LADIES

"Did I say he was young? Well, not too young. Not so old, either. And, yes, in spite of your reservations, I think that his sort of lean narrow face is of the rather good looking type. And he has a tongue in his head; he is not at loss. He can exchange commonplaces neatly. Oh, yes, quite a good tenant for 'Green Ladies,' quite an acquisition to the neighborhood."

"And all this since when?" said the other in her twinkling way. "All this in—how many meetings?"

The girl busied herself with an elusive prune.

"Call it," she said after a pause, "call it one. His name is Peter John." She looked up directly at the young woman of sixty-six.

"Don't know it," said the other decisively.

"It isn't a bad name," said the girl. "It has a good air. He was in the war. No, not as a soldier, just as a fighter; he joined up in 1914. They made him a major and he had some sort of illness in the Dardanelles and again in Palestine. He was also wounded in Foch's big advance."

"One meeting, did you say?"

"One meeting and 'Who's Who,' " answered the girl unabashed. "Also I had a little previous knowledge. Some people in town know of him, and I happen to remember what they said. He is more than civilly well-to-do; he is, himself,

## GREEN LADIES

what you would call—only you are so determinedly English, a ‘high-brow.’ ”

“Do you call him a ‘high-brow’?”

“Bless you, no, but then I’m determinedly English, too. He’s a savant of an archæological plane. He’s written books and articles—I’ve read one in one of those reviews everybody reveres and rarely reads.”

“A professor man?”

“Not a bit of it. Something with good red blood in his veins. He explores. His archæology is only at the tale of his adventures. He is, apparently, the sort of man who prefers his interesting ruin to be on the further side of a virgin jungle, or in the heart of untracked and dangerous mountains; generally in Peru or Brazil or Mexico or Guatemala or Yucatan—I could say Yucatan for an hour—hasn’t it a blessed sound?”

“All this,” said the young woman of sixty-six again, “all this in a number of meetings we will call one.”

“And ‘Who’s Who,’ and the reports of mutual friends. One is bound to take some polite interest in the tenant of ‘Green Ladies.’ ”

“Yes, that would not be unnatural,” said the young lady of sixty-six. She looked at the girl with a smiling and enigmatic glance. She stood up, smoothing the serviceable tweed costume on

## GREEN LADIES

her stocky yet resilient figure. She was a very jaunty young woman of sixty-six, carrying herself and her wedding-ring with a braveness and impulsiveness that had a dash all its own. She looked down now at the girl with the bright glance which saw a good deal more than the blunt tongue found necessary to express. She nodded briskly.

"I see why you want to interest me in your 'Green Ladies' man. You think he'll miss some of the wildernesses and dangers of South America. I shall certainly do my best to be a virgin swamp. I'll call." She looked at the girl. "And I'll keep my eye on him."

The girl looked up and nodded and smiled. The brisk little lady in the useful tweeds had understood her meaning.



## XVII

THE monarch of nearly all he surveyed ("After all," he reflected, "my outlook on the Island *is* included in the lease. It is metaphysically mine.") sat in a long cushioned chair on the terrace of "Green Ladies" watching the Island paint itself into an impressionistic study of evening. Already it had become a thing of soft misty stipplings. Greens and grays and yellows and reds were running themselves into each other in a sweet confusion against the mat surface of green and gilt and blue forming the mist-drowsed background of sky.

He sat reflecting, glancing down at the little packet of spilled jewels that was the garden, his garden, with an air rueful as well as content. His eyes rested always upon the reticent back of Eden, Eden who with movements almost ritualistic was curling the fringes of the flowers. He was probably doing things more reasonable, but his curious, individual, affectionate treatment of the blossoms had that air.

Upon that incommunicable back Peter bent his rueful, questioning glance.

## GREEN LADIES

"Could you," he wondered, "solve this riddle? Could you, at a word, ease a conscience thoroughly disturbed by good fortune? Or have you nothing to offer? Are you really an hierophant of the Hieracosphinx, or am I making you out a devil of a deep fellow simply because I can't quite believe the truth when I see it?"

He sat and let his thoughts go back over the last few hours—the incredible luck of events, the dismaying smoothness of all that had happened. He glanced at the façade of "Green Ladies." "You look beautiful, but are you sinister?" he asked. "Will you develop ghosts or drains or chimneys that foully smoke?"

"Green Ladies" remained exquisitely serene. Eden stood upright and looked down with a slow love at the flowers.

"Eden," called Peter, half twisting in his chair. The old man looked up and allowed Peter to share his fine smile for the flowers.

"Eden," said Peter cheerfully, "when will we have the earthquake?"

The old man glanced at the sky and the Island, as though automatically testing the nature signs that foretold all the worst earthquakes. Then he smiled up at Peter again, and said:

"There are no earthquakes in Hampshire, sir."

He did not ask why Peter had been stupid

## GREEN LADIES

enough to imagine there should be; he had arrived at the definite knowledge that when Peter was inexplicable he was probably humorous.

"A cyclone then?" put in Peter, as one leaving it to a higher faculty. "A cyclone, or a tornado, maybe; something that will tear us all up and throw us aside shattered forever—or do you think 'Green Ladies' will be burnt down in the night? Do you think it's that?"

Eden took a perceptible step towards the house.

"To-night," he echoed in concern. "God ha' mercy on us." He stared at the house. "It *couldn't* burn down," he said deeply. Then he realized that Peter was Peter. "You gave me a fright, sir," he said with a smile that the mist of anxiety only half veiled.

"It would give me a fright, too," said Peter. "It would give me a life of gloom. Oh, I don't want it to be burnt down or earthquakeed or tornadoed—but don't you think something *must* happen?"

"A little rain may be, sir," said Eden, teasing his friends the flowers with his hoe. "The wind's worked southwest. But a little rain—that's all to the good."

"Good! I don't mean good," protested Peter. "Don't you *feel* anything ominous?"

## GREEN LADIES

Eden thought "ominous" might have a catchy meaning, but he determined to take the risk.

"Why, no, sir," he said, smiling. "Why should I? It's velvet weather, and the flowers are coming up—there's nothing amiss in the world."

"But isn't that the flaw in it? Isn't it rather too good, overdoing blessings? You're not afraid of it all?" insisted Peter. "You're not scared because things have gone so well? You're not trembling at the huge goodness of good fortune?"

Eden thought, looking serenely out to sea.

"No, sir," he said slowly. "Perhaps I'm used to it. Perhaps I'm too old."

As he looked out to the Island Peter could fancy the old, mellow man, turning over his life's good luck—Eve Eden, the pinnacle and summit of his good luck, this view of the Island; this garden; this sweet and gracious Hampshire air—all these true and simple things. Perhaps he had, in truth, become used to it; good fortune could no longer affront or startle him.

"All the same," reflected Peter, "happiness makes cowards of us all. Don't you agree, Eden, that it's all been too good to be true?"

"Meaning, sir?" said Eden, now resolved that whimsical conversation would have no deleterious effect on the practical business of hoeing.

## GREEN LADIES

"All of it. Yesterday I came here and saw this was the best of all houses in the world. So it is—but it was empty; it was 'to be let furnished'; it was absolutely ready to my bed and board, so to speak. The best of all the houses in the world aren't like that, Eden. Not as a rule. One either dreams them, and then a callous architect says, 'Very pretty, but how am I going to get a kitchen and a drainage system into your preposterous villa of vision?' which means one has glimpsed the unattainable. Or, if one actually meets the house in the brick, then it is inhabited by maiden ladies whom, though one wants to, sentimental human convention forbids one turning adrift, or by brutes who produce ninety-nine-year leases—few fond hopes can survive a ninety-nine-year lease, Eden."

"It's a long time, sir," admitted Eden; "but I have known men to live to beyond a hundred."

"Not with unimpaired enthusiasms," insisted Peter. "But 'Green Ladies' is neither a dream nor was it bastioned about by maiden ladies and ninety-nine-year leases. I saw it. I said I would have it, and I have it. Nobody said 'No'; nobody said 'Wait a moment, we suddenly remember we must do this first,' or, 'We must write several letters to nobodies in particular, and keep you waiting about for no reasons at all.' Noth-



## GREEN LADIES

ing like that happened. In less than twenty-four hours an object of human desire has been fully and smoothly attained—doesn't it seem all wrong to you, Eden?"

"It sounds all natural, sir," suggested Eden, doing geometrical things with his hoe. And then he said with a soft smile playing around his lips, "After all, sir, Miss Phillippa was not in her house and wanted to let it. You were in the house and wanted to take it; you were both getting your ends, sir."

"Well, I'm jiggered," said the amazed Peter. "To stun a man with his own club; it's unexpected of you, Eden."

He looked at the old man again. Why this sudden flash from an unsuspected reserve? Was Eden actually old and serene and simple, or were there really Machiavellian depths in him? Was he, too, playing a part in a conspiracy that was perplexing Peter by the gorgeous ease and smoothness with which his good fortune was being stage-managed?

He thought over events again.

Hadn't the lawyers acted strangely, unnaturally? Wasn't it wrong for lawyers to be simple and friendly? Weren't lawyers after all the instinctive enemies of man, anyhow of man trying to lease a house from them?



## GREEN LADIES

What right had they to shatter traditions and do things on the nail, to do them at once without any tortuous meanderings, or twisting into side issues or "whereases," or making things thoroughly dragging, harassing and damnable with temporizations and clauses, and pittings-back and puttings-off?

These lawyers had outraged his sense of law-  
yerdom. They had made things almost intolerably smooth-working.

They had arrived in their own big car from Southampton. They had come with everything prepared. They had come ready to be thoroughly accommodating.

They had brought an estate agent, who produced leases, and the other queer forms Peter had to sign magically. The fellow waved his hands, and leases all complete seemed to appear in them.

Peter John had sat at his side of the big green-topped desk in the study prepared to contest all objections with a running exhibition of logic and argument, plus certain hard facts he possessed, the chief being his pass-book, which fortunately traveled with him. They had driven him to moodiness by their cheery assent to all his ruthless demands.

They had accepted his being here, his having

## GREEN LADIES

entered the house by force, his having slept in it against all householder's precedent, his having, as the man in possession, forced them to confirm in legal terms his highway robbery—they had accepted all that as the most natural thing in the world. Peter had been ready with a quip to meet any of their legitimate protests at his behavior. . . . He had a rapier thrust or two to deliver in his neatest manner against their prosaic expostulations. When the senior lawyer, who looked big and sleek, and quite like an old-fashioned clergyman who had shaved his side whiskers, but still had the ghosts of them about him, began, or should have begun, "I think you'll admit, Mr. John, that your action must be regarded as a trifle high-handed. . . ." He intended to *riposté* with . . .

But the senior lawyer asked him in a voice of milk if he had slept well. And the junior lawyer was anxious to know if Eden and Eve Eden had done everything to make him comfortable.

Confound them, what right had he had to sleep well? What right had Eden and Eve Eden to make him comfortable?

And the agent had said:

"House's not damp? No. Wouldn't be. 'N excellent condition——"

Peter had stared at them. What manner of

## GREEN LADIES

responsible business creatures were these? Who were *they* to sit complacent when any tramp might force his way into the respectable houses they were supposed to safeguard, on the mere specious pretext of wanting to take them?

He had then said truculently:

"I want the house from last night. I want it now. I must have it at once. I don't intend to leave it at all," and he looked at them, expecting—well, worse than that—hoping the senior lawyer would intone.

"I'm afraid we can't be so quick as all that, Mr. John. A big business like this cannot be hurried. There are details to be gone into. Reference and things to be taken up. . . ."

And the senior lawyer beamed. He said to the agent,

"Mr. Cats, you have the lease?"

And Mr. Matthew Cats waved his hand and suddenly in it was a lease, and he said with an all-enfolding grin:

"All'n-order, Mr. Kipinkenny. Leases—two. Yes, leases for signature—ready."

They had put the two leases before Peter and he had read them, or tried to read them, through. They told him he'd find them quite in order. He supposed he would if he really knew how to find leases in order, and indeed he thought they must

## GREEN LADIES

be. Somehow he felt he ought to take their word for it. They knew so much more about these things than he, and they were so ready to help. And then if he made any suggestion they'd quickly show him, tactfully of course, that it wasn't at all a bright suggestion, and that the thing he objected to was the sort of thing that always went into the best leases. . . . On the whole, reading it through as he did, it seemed a straightforward lease. . . .

And really it wasn't the lease he was objecting to. It was this unceremonial signing, this absence of any attack upon his character, or his motives of honesty, or on his desire for speed. He took up his pen; he looked at them.

"You'll want references, of course," he insisted.

"Well, yes," said the senior lawyer. "As a matter of form. Well, yes."

"This," said Peter John, pushing his bank book forward, "this is the referee who will speak most earnestly for me."

"Oh, well, it's not at all——" began Mr. Kipinkenny, and then Peter said:

"I'd feel much more businesslike if you looked."

"Purely formal," said Mr. Kipinkenny. He took the bank book; he looked at it in the manner of man forced to read a novel by an author whom

## GREEN LADIES

he did not like. He noted Peter's bank, which was a very useful sort of bank to hold at the head of lawyers. He glanced at the credits. Then he put the book down. Peter could have cremated him. His blandness was beyond human endurance. Peter could swear that if an instrument registering emotions had been applied to the fellow, it would not have registered the acceleration of a beat. And he said, stoically:

"Purely formal, Mr. John. Very satisfactory."

All through the negotiations they had been upheld by their attitude of devastating acquiescence. These lawyers were absurdities; they were lambs in wolves' clothing. They agreed to anything. They even accepted his check for rent in advance under polite protest.

He tried to prick them awake with talk of an inventory. If anything can stir the passions of primitive man in the breasts of house-letting lawyers and agents it is a casual disregard of such a rubrical thing as an inventory.

Peter was heretical concerning inventories. He objected to having inventory composers littered about the place. To have strange thick-booted men of tenacious habits about his restful house would be——

But Mr. Cats produced an inventory.



## GREEN LADIES

Peter might have known he would. That agent would produce Peter's birth certificate, or the marriage lines of his grandmother, if necessary. He would produce anything. Nothing could baffle him. The inventory was quite all right. It had been drawn up less than two weeks ago—fortunately.

Peter was becoming fearful of good fortune. There was too much of it about. Surely the gods were bemusing him with luck the better to destroy him.

"I suppose it was drawn up when you heard I was coming down," he said bitterly to Mr. Cats, conscious that two weeks ago he had had not the slightest idea that he was coming down—and he was bowled over by the answer.

"Probably, Mr. John."

Peter could not fight against their good intentions. The house he wanted became his without a blessed, jarring objection. It became his in twenty minutes.

"Very satisfactorily settled," said Mr. Kipinkenny as though pronouncing grace after lease. "Purely formal, but most satisfactory."

"You think so," said Peter, with bitter amiability. "But was there anything unusual, anything to make it otherwise? Aren't all houses let like this?"



## GREEN LADIES

"Not always," said Mr. Kipinkenny, and then the ingrained lawyer in him raised its scaly head for a moment: "There are certain aspects in this matter which are unusual, I might say, most unusual. If we had been concerned alone—but, there, our instructions were definite. In fact, most definite."

"Oh," said Peter lamely. "You had instructions?"

"Why, yes, naturally, Mr. John," cried Mr. Kipinkenny, really alarmed that Peter should think this brisk manner of his was a business habit.

"Instructions—from the owner?"

"Of course," said Mr. Kipinkenny.

"By telegram," said Mr. Eleventrees, the second lawyer, who looked extraordinarily like all those footmen who walked on and arranged the plates, and then said, "Dinner is served, my lord," in all that sort of play, all the world over. "By telegram, Mr. John, and by telephone—our instructions were most implicit. And then we had confirmation over the telephone when we arrived. That clinched it as far as we were concerned." His manner said, "So you see we really had no chance of making things thoroughly unpleasant for you."

"I suppose that explains," admitted Peter, feel-

## GREEN LADIES

ing rather limp. He picked up the leases. He read them absently. They were headed, "The de Pierre Estate of 'Green Ladies.'" He had grasped that much before. "Green Ladies" belonged to unknown people called the de Pierres. So much he had learned then. But neither that fact nor the leases helped him. He said:

"But, look here, this is made out to the name of Howlett & Wink, of Great Turnstile, London. Whom have you been telephoning to, Howlett or Wink?"

Mr. Kipinkenny laughed, a ruri-decanal timbre of laugh.

"Howlett & Wink are lawyers. They act for our client; we act for them in this neighborhood. The lease was drawn up under instructions."

"From Wink or Howlett?"

"Neither; both are too far away from our client, the owner of 'Green Ladies.'"

"That would be Miss Phillippa," said Peter, firing his shot full in their faces.

"It is Miss Phillippa," said the senior lawyer, after a flicker of a pause, in which he showed palpably to the world that he recognized he had put his foot in it.

"Miss Phillippa de Pierre?" asked Peter deliberately.

## GREEN LADIES

Mr. Kipinkenny blinked at him, obviously feeling that whatever befall he must say no more.

"Miss Phillippa—Miss Phillippa does not wish to appear," said Mr. Eleventrees smoothly, as one who knew how to deal with dangerous situations. "For reasons—which no doubt you will respect, Mr. John."

"Oh, damn," thought Peter, "why should I? I don't want to respect 'em. I want to know."

"Of course," he said aloud. Peter could see that if he looked rather like a "dinner is served, my lord," young man, Mr. Eleventrees all the same had wits. He went on, looking grimly at Peter's chin,

"Miss Phillippa understood you wanted the house in a hurry. . . . Well, your telegrams to us make the matter plain. Miss Phillippa saw no reason why you should not be met. . . . Miss Phillippa is satisfied that all will be well, and gave us explicit instructions. We have acted upon them—to your satisfaction, I hope."

"But I thought Miss Phillippa was away——"

"For the moment, luckily," said Mr. Eleventrees, "she is in——"

"In the neighborhood?" said Peter, really only trying to help him out.

"In the area, anyhow within telephone radius—luckily," said Mr. Eleventrees, with a blink.

## GREEN LADIES

But even that wouldn't quite do. Again there was that confounding air of reticence, of mystery. Why should principals be satisfied without reason? And over the telephone, too. Why should principals neglect their jobs? Why shouldn't Miss Phillippa do her duty as an ordinary, reputable landlord? Why shouldn't she come and interview him, or allow him to go and interview her, in order to see for herself whether he wasn't a tramp, or a furniture destroyer by instinct? Why should she accept him on trust—and by telephone?

"Even being in the same telephone area," he said, a little nettled, "doesn't help one instantaneously to decide upon a tenant one has not seen, one does not know——"

"No," said the lawyers, packing up their traps, "no, perhaps not. But from what we gathered from Miss Phillippa, she seems to know you, or to know of you already, Mr. John."

Peter John stared at them.

"Oh, but I say," he blurted, "but that's rather preposterous. I don't know Miss Phillippa. I don't know of a Miss de Pierre who owns a house called 'Green Ladies.' I am certain I have not met her."

The lawyers bowed to him, the agent bobbed to him.

## GREEN LADIES

"We know no more," they said, "no more than we have told you. We have received instructions, and they were explicit."

They went, leaving Peter John baffled but, all the same, the full and legal tenant of "Green Ladies" for a year with the option of an extension.

"This Miss Phillippa knows me or knows of me," Peter groaned from his chair to the Island, to the sunset, to the back of Eden. "And that only makes things more complicated. Why should an unknown person know me, and do things for me? It's—it's part of this colossal good fortune, and it is making me scared."

He thought for a moment of finding out all about these de Pierres. He could inquire. Eden might tell him something. He could, no doubt, turn up many of the facts in the *County History*. But he felt no definite impulse to get facts from either Eden or History. He was not very interested in de Pierres. Man really isn't actively concerned in his landlords.

He let the de Pierres slide from his mind; tomorrow, some day, he would find out all about them, even about this spinster, Miss Phillippa. But now he had other things to intrigue his mind. There was this luck and the girl who was also a hamadryad.

## GREEN LADIES

When he lifted himself from his terrace chair and walked towards the pale, serene face of the house shining softly through the dusk of the night, he looked deliberately and long towards the hushed and secret shadows of the trees.

He looked with an attention almost poignant, but as he looked he knew it was of no avail.

He had felt none of the subtle and delicate sensations that had warned him last night that some one—something mystical and sympathetic—was watching him from under the darkling shades of the pines.

And his eyes told him what his senses had already conveyed—that the slim shade was not there.



## XVIII

**B**UT he met her no later than the next morning.

The next day he walked, with perhaps a spirit of determination not to go the other way, eastward along the fringes of the sea.

In that grave half hour, after rising, when human nature is most exposed to its relentless self, the half hour that begins with the first lather of the shaving brush, and ends with the final pat to the tie, he caught himself thinking of the girl.

He caught himself thinking too much of the girl, remembering with curious vividness the way she had appeared to him on the cliff, with all the world and the blue sky behind her; he caught himself recalling the way she had carried herself, and the lift of her chin, and her strange, slim, flexile grace. And about the last stroke of the razor, he had said aloud, as though the spoken voice could browbeat the unspoken thoughts:

"You are letting your mind idle too long in the company of that sylph, Peter John." And then, as his mind did not immediately come to heel, "Enough of this, Peter Fool."

## GREEN LADIES

Then at once he began to think of the soft, decisive note of her voice; the sureness and charm of her speaking, and the things she had said, and the way she had said them, and the gentle play of her emotions, her vivacity, her wit, her candor, that had come to her pointed and alluring face as she spoke.

And he had gone on thinking of her voice, until he twitched his tie into decency, and then he had scowled over his tie at this mazy-dreaming Peter of the mirror, and had muttered:

"You know you're being a transcendental ass. You know that in common decency you must stop."

And so, after breakfast, he went the other way, and was rather sorry for himself as he went.

He did not intend to go far. Presently he was to return and hand to his chauffeur a list of things, mainly clothes, that that super young man and the car were to bring back from town. Peter ought himself to go to town. There should be a resolute packing of goods, there should be, for instance, a gathering together of books, that were to form the scaffolding of the work Peter John was to do in "Green Ladies." But Peter John had compromised with his conscience about that packing and those books. He had told himself that he must enjoy "Green Ladies" without dis-

## GREEN LADIES

traction for a few days; he would have it flawless of books for a short spell; . . . and he would look about him.

He said look about him, in that general sense, for he shied at the actual truth. Even then he was trying to convince himself that his looking about actually meant looking in all directions and not merely in one direction, and that a little westward.

So he went for his short walk, and did not go as far as he intended. A very little way along the sea-edge he overtook the girl, sauntering easily with a sort of song of movement, in the same direction.

Presently she turned to see the view. She turned, as the wise do, suddenly, as though to catch the beauty of the earth unaware, as though to get a peep at nature before it could dissemble and become mere scenery. As she turned she saw Peter, and she stopped walking.

With a tingling of pleasure (all sensible admonitions forgotten) Peter relished to the full the singular intimacy of that friendly movement; the indolent half-turn of the supple and delicate body, as her eyes followed the glory of the view; then the suspension as she recognized him, an attitude half motion, half pause, the movement of a Psyche caught for all time by a single, sumptuous

## GREEN LADIES

sweep of a sculptor's thumb; then a deliberate pause, and turning to wait for him.

She was comely and upright, and in her light dress, an indescribable milliner's miracle in soft biscuit color with points of cherry, she looked at a distance, and in the clarity of the sunlight, rather like a slender flame; rather like a clear, strong flame burning with something of the sun's golden ardor against a background of green.

And as he walked towards her Peter reflected:

"After all, *is* she a thing of the shadows and trees? Isn't she, in fact, more fitted to be the sun god's daughter?"

Near enough he saw her smile.

"Ehee! but she smiles with the sun of the sun, and not with the melancholy of the shadow. She is the daughter of the sun, and without doubt I have done magic for her. I have released her to the sun. Two days ago she was imprisoned in the woods, chained in the shadows of those firs which are, after all, pines. There she waited for some one to come and release her, for some one to break Merlin's black spell. I took 'Green Ladies' and that broke the spell. She has become free to assume her natural form and go out into the day."

And when he came very near, he came closer

## GREEN LADIES

to the facts of life, and he said, almost with a frown in his heart:

"She is very beautiful. . . . I wish she were less beautiful."

Then he joined her and agreed with her—as though he had thought no thoughts at all—that even though it was not April but July, it was good to be in England now.

"Are you discovering your kingdom?" she asked, as they walked again, and she gave him a bright glance that was enigmatic, even amused, as well as friendly.

"Am I?" he asked. "If this is part of it, I am. How far does my kingdom extend? I am still woefully ignorant."

"It ends over there by the tiny headland; it ends in an imaginary line, for all the world as if it were a brother to an equator, and it passes by those trees to where the fence begins. But surely . . . ? Your own kingdom . . . ?"

Her eyes glanced at him, amused, ironical, as if to say:

"But what have you been doing with yourself during the long tenancy at which you hinted yesterday on the cliff? Surely you have not neglected your estate—all that time? Surely you have not allowed those weeks and weeks to go by without beating your boundaries? Where can your in-



## GREEN LADIES

stincts have been? What have you been doing with your weeks—or is it months?—of occupation?”

She smiled all this at him, and Peter smiled back. He knew she had caught him out, but he put a bold face on it; he said largely:

“Oh, I leave my kingdom to Eden; the house is enough for me. I am not yet out of my first fond rapture.”

“Yet it is worth knowing. It is quite a beautiful little kingdom.”

They turned and saw the gentle fields, and across them the bold massing of the pines; and through the militarist pines there was a glimpse of the house, the Gothic so strangely built into it, making it austere and white and, yet it seemed, smiling gravely in the friendly serenity of the sun, aloof and white and beautiful it was with its feet in the jeweled carpet of Eden’s flowers.

“I shall come to my Kingdom in time,” Peter told the girl. “I shall savor it all bit by bit. The house, and then the estate, and then Hampshire. I shall come to it slowly, rolling it on my tongue, for I have plenty of time. I have broad acres of time before me.”

The last slipped out. It was one of those little pricks of unconsidered thought that spring unbidden into the mind, and that serve to remind one



## GREEN LADIES

of one's loss, what will now be one's limitation. Peter saw his limitation; he would be chained to the house, to England for life, and no longer be allowed to go beyond the length of the chain.

The girl stood looking at the house, and then she looked away from it slowly, taking in the length and breadth of the view.

"How lucky you are!" she said.

"Am I? Yes, perhaps I am," he agreed.

"Perhaps?" she echoed. "But, no, certainly; not merely because you've found 'Green Ladies,' that's a great good fortune in itself, but because you've found England. I envy you. I envy you as I always envy people who are about to begin a book I have found delightful. This is the book of England, you know—not Hampshire, not just a little corner of the kingdom, but all England. You can't turn up a road of this soil without disinterring history."

Something of Peter's own love for ancient things kindled at the girl's enthusiasm. She stood as a type of England herself, bright, strong, swift-built and erect; fair as England was fair with all the brightness of England in her face, and with all the dreamy mystery of England seated in her contemplative gaze.

"You know it and love it well," said Peter.

"I was born in Hampshire," she said. "My

## GREEN LADIES

very roots are in the soil, and I have lived here all my life."

She paused. Peter hung waiting with a pleasurable excitement. She must, he thought, say more now. She must tell him something about herself. Solve the engima that surrounded her. And she did nothing of the kind. She said with a fleck of a smile in her reflective eye, "Do my enthusiasms and loyalties for my parish pump carry me too far?"

"When your parish pump is all England, there can scarcely be a limit to enthusiasm and loyalty."

"Well, it is as big as that. The whole spirit of the land and race is concentrated into the very air we breathe. England grew up out of this, you know. The souls of saints and kings and teachers and heroes and the staunch common men who made the very beginnings of England impregnate this broad land. Winchester was the capital before London was even thought desirable. England sprang from Alfred, and Winchester was Alfred's town. English law sprang from Winchester, and English learning, too. In Alfred's monkish schools young England was taught; within the walls of Winchester the first history of England was written, and chained in the Cathedral Church so that all men could go and read it.

"And all over the county there are little bits

## GREEN LADIES

of the past, older than Alfred even. Over at Baddesley there is a tiny church high up on a hill, and first the painted pagans worshiped there, then the Romans built a temple over the ancient altar shrine, and then the Christians made the temple into a church. . . . A little old church of brick that is history, standing on a hill that has held the altars of all our English faiths. At Romsey, too, there is a great church lording it over a sleepy town, and you pull at a ring in the floor of the church and the floor comes up and underneath there are the stones that Saxon workmen laid at the orders of the first Lady Abbess of Romsey.

“And then think of all the devoted men who have marched through Hampshire to uphold the ideals of the Anglo-Saxon spirit. Southampton—do you know that it was on Southampton shores that Canute sat and got his feet wetted by the waves? Southampton has always been the gate of English valor. Saxon and Dane and Frenchmen have known it as the entry port of England. A French Dauphin tried to steal England through Southampton in a dash for Winchester. At Southampton you can still see the little gate through which the hosts of Agincourt marched, their pikes striking the walls of the narrow olden street that still holds its memory, to embark for France. . . . Think of all the hosts of England

## GREEN LADIES

sailing from Southampton to the wars down to the host that sailed away in the War. Ships of war are built here, too. In a little dead village on a dead stream; at Bucklers Hard on Beaulieu river—a splendid name?”

“A name born to the purple,” agreed Peter.

“In that tiny, inconspicuous, half-vanished village on an inconspicuous stream they used to build the British ships of the line. They dragged the oak from the New Forest, and built up the big war vessels on the slips. You can’t get a reasonable sized tug up Beaulieu river now, but great ships went out from it, and their guns thundered at Trafalgar.”

She paused and laughed.

“I can’t begin or end the story of Hampshire,” she laughed. “But you must find it all out for yourself.”

They were walking away from the sea. They had struck back along a field path and were coming to the road. Peter was a little intolerant of that road. Roads, when one comes to them, are places where people part, intimacy breaks off and conversations end.

He did not want this conversation to end. He had a sense of restfulness, of serenity, of supreme satisfaction while in the presence of this girl. Her very proximity; the charity, the high demeanor,

## GREEN LADIES

the gentleness, the humor and the sympathy comforted him. In her presence he felt, indeed, that the sun of life was a radiant thing and not a mockery. He forgot the ghosts of his melancholy; he forgot his wistful desires.

He did not say in his heart, "I wish you were less beautiful," but he said, "She really is astonishingly good looking. Every turn of her, every new inflection, every shade of thought, every movement, even the little, trivial, unconsidered movements and shades and inflections are songs of beauty. I really do believe she is the most attractive woman I have ever met."

And then at the road, as he had feared, she stopped. She stopped, and her eyes smiled at him with that half-expressed raillery, that gentle, kindling irony that was part of her captivating individuality.

"Well, here is a country ready and waiting to your archæological hand," she said.

She nodded at him, and for the moment he could only utter an astonished "Oh," a feeble, witless "Oh," before the shock of the fact that she should know something about him.

And perhaps she enjoyed his surprise.

"You should make something of it," she said, "unless, of course, your heart is wedded to South America."



## GREEN LADIES

"Oh," he cried again, and as feebly, "oh, you know about South America?"

"Why not?" she smiled at him, and her eyes were half-veiled by her long lashes, as she relished his bewilderment. "Why not? If you write articles for the public press you mustn't take it amiss if people occasionally read them."

And Peter John, looking at her still bound by his astonishment, murmured in his heart:

"I wish you wrote for the public press, and had your name, and, after the modern fashion, your photograph published by the public press, then I should know who you are, and what your name is; and this pleasant interlude wouldn't be so woe-fully one-sided."

And aloud he said, "Oh, 'amiss' is not the word; I take it so little amiss that I think it is almost too good to be true. The astonishing thing is to meet a person who has read them."

"Well, I have read them—you have met me."

"Hampshire, I am beginning to recognize, is the home of miracles as well as history. I hope the articles didn't bore you to extinction."

"Then, of course, I wouldn't have read them, and my boast would be empty."

Peter John was beginning to recover from this surprising, this altogether pleasing, shock. But his sense of pique increased. She knew all about



## GREEN LADIES

him, yet he knew nothing of her save that she was beautiful, a neighbor, and had read his articles in the public press.

"The subject of the articles gives them some passing interest," he admitted, with a certain severity of judgment.

"And the manner, too," she answered. "Obviously, you are in love with South America."

"I was," he said, with a touch of seriousness.

"You are now, I think," she said, studying him with her gentle, ironic gravity, and then again with that surprising touch as though she knew what lay in his soul. "But perhaps Hampshire will take its place in your heart."

"There seems," said Peter, looking at her steadfastly, "there seems to be fairly definite reasons to think it will."

But after she had left him, when he was walking back along the road to "Green Ladies," he said to himself,

"I might almost name a reason if I only knew her name. . . ." and presently, "I really must find out all about her."

## XIX

**A**ND with astonishing regularity Peter did not see the girl for four days.

It was an astounding, almost an affronting, blank. The high glory of the weather continued. Eden's prophetic shower had come and had merely added rapture to the shining perfection of the emerald and ruby, the topaz and fire-opal and mother-o'-pearl that made the grass and the flowers of his jeweled corner of the world.

The sea was never so splendid, and the view of the Islands never so quick as during those four comely and intolerable days. And he felt that all this attractiveness was affected and empty.

"What is the good of your being a mere background?" he asked of the world. "A background is only surveyor's topography without its figure in the foreground, its transfiguring subject. And you're that. You're a song without music and without words. You are lumps of earth and puddles of water. Ichabod is written all over you."

He frowned as he said this. The mere saying of it made him understand that most of the things

## GREEN LADIES

that latterly he had been pretending to be were polite mockeries. His interest had betrayed his attitude toward life. He had come down to "Green Ladies" to retire apart. He had rented "Green Ladies" because it possessed all that he considered ideal in remoteness. And here he was, fretting himself like a schoolboy, because one girl, slim, graceful and of nereid quality, had not gone with the lease of the house.

He frowned, and he said, "I'm a sheer ass in my fancies to-day." He made those shrugs and gestures and head noises by which man endeavors to convince himself that nothing out of the ordinary has been happening. That he had merely moved through life in his regular, commonplace way . . . but Peter John wasn't to be bluffed by this reason. The blackest part of his frown came from the knowledge that he knew what had been happening to him during the past four days.

When he examined the conscience of those days he saw the things he had been doing in the sedate, silken ease of their smooth unfolding. And what he saw disturbed him.

No, he had not run after this girl, this thing slim and fine in the sunlight and of a shadow's grace in the shadow. No, he had not run after her; he was of course only intrigued by her, by her mystery, not attracted, not seriously attracted,

## GREEN LADIES

for he knew that circumstances forbade his being attracted, but . . .

Although, studiously, he had altered his bathing time in order not to pry, he had every morning looked eagerly across the wide and superb arc of the gold-dusty sands. He knew he might not see that first morning's vivid scene again, but he had looked and he had hoped to have just the barest glimpse of a swift slim figure moving in a fine, boylike stride towards the sea.

He had hoped to see, like some classic thing come to life, the blue-clad erectness of her body standing sharp against the gold, and the burning splash of her peignoir upon the gold, and the white flash of the sea as it joyfully and riotously became one with her.

And not seeing her . . . somehow the soul of the sea and the wind of the sea had had less zest, less vigor.

And then, since he must walk daily, he had walked, not to meet her. . . . No, certainly not. Why should he? But he had given opportunity its full chance.

He had walked along the cliff. Hurst Castle, an inconceivably dull home of dullness, a fortress of abbey stone, a mass of anachronism where the cloisters of Beaulieu had been wrought into the ramparts of Henry VIII, but for all that had

## GREEN LADIES

never fulfilled the peculiar destiny of ramparts, and had done nothing more than, and that quite accidentally, become the prison for a King who had lost his head. Hurst Castle called him east. Northeast the New Forest called. He had gone west.

Deliberately, every morning, he had paused at the foot of the terrace steps, pretending with the very feeblest pretense that his mind was not made up, pretending to be so thoroughly perplexed by the number of desirable strolls that lay to his choice that he was uncertain which one to take. And he had gone west.

He had walked briskly and with determination along the cliff path. When he came to that open vista on the little cliff, that particular open vista, his briskness became the languorous indolence of a meander.

He had, on his second walk out, perceived that there was a window in the thatching of the cottage which was her home; a window with a flower box and dainty curtains and a section of twisted Jacobean mirror in it, which did not suggest a cook, or even the housekeeper, whom one dare not affront, but some one much more individual and tasteful. And this window obviously raked his path. If, by fortunate chance, some one, somebody, should be looking out of that window . . .



## GREEN LADIES

well, here was Peter John, well in sight, and willing to pass the time of day with any one who could appreciate its beauty.

But nobody appeared ready to appreciate its beauty.

"If people neglect weather like this," Peter muttered ruefully, "they deserve to live in Newfoundland. How can they expect the sun and the flowers and it all to keep at top pitch without encouragement?"

One day, it must be said, he did show strength of mind. He did not take the cliff path that led by the back of the little thatched cottage. He was very strong. Very determined. He took the metaled road that ran by the front of the little thatched cottage.

From the front it was the comeliest cottage. Its original and rather inefficient windows had been removed, and broad and generous windows had been substituted. He caught a glimpse of an interior of oak and silver and lively and vitalizing chintz covers.

The front garden had a tiny piece of lawn looking like an inlay of green between Oriental wantonnesses of flowers. Flowers, all manner and sexes and qualities of flowers, poured up from the borders of the lawn; they spilled and heaped and spirited skywards, in very much the manner of liv-



## GREEN LADIES

ing fountains of a thousand tints forever at play. They seemed to run up the red, broad steps of the cottage and call with voices of happy color through the door, a massive oak affair, grim with nails, and always open.

Inside the door there appeared the suggestion of a coolness, like deep water, and the blue drugget, and the shine of copper.

But no nereid.

No hamadryad.

No enigma.

Not even Mrs. MacStinger.

Nothing.

Goaded by this insufferable feminine reticence, Peter John did a thing that it was not his nature to do. He would not have done it had not Providence placed a hedger at that precise spot for asking questions. Peter asked the hedger a question. He asked who lived in the house.

Without looking up, the hedger said, "Mrs. Patricot." He said "Mrs. Patricot" twice, for he had learnt that people did not always catch it the first time, and he went on hedging.

Peter did not know that he was not Hampshire, that he had come from some grim land north of Basingstoke, and was therefore not human and affable and friendly, and given to conversation. If that hedger had been Hampshire Peter would

## GREEN LADIES

have learnt much about this Mrs. Patricot and her peculiar charm.

But as it was, he learnt no more than her name, and that mattered very little.

"She is living with somebody," his mind told him, and of course he meant the girl of the cliff, and not Mrs. Patricot. "She is staying with this Mrs. Patricot."

Was he jumping at conclusions? Was he being stupid in ignoring the fact that even a nereid might be called Patricot for the purpose of human intercourse, and Mrs. into the bargain? He felt certain he was not being stupid. His intuition, his years of training in the world, had taught him that young women who carried themselves with just that something in their poise were not at all married. His very reason told him she was not married.

Also, he had noticed that she had no wedding ring.

"She is living with Mrs. Patricot," he determined. "And the fact that she is living with Mrs. Patricot does not help me in the least."

## XX

**T**HAT evening, it was the evening of the fourth day, he made up his mind to try a fall with Eden. He would confront that charming and Buddha-like fellow with Mrs. Patricot, and by surprise assault tear from him the secret of the cottage and the girl who lived in the cottage.

But it was on that evening that he frowned, and remembered all that had happened in the four days, and the folly of that that had happened.

He had come to "Green Ladies" not because a girl was proximate, but to escape the proximity of girlhood. Girlhood was not for him. The ordinary life of men and women was not for him. He had come here to escape from life; to be alone; to cumber the earth as little as possible; to complicate the lives of others—including hamadryads—as little as possible. He had come here to bury himself. It was really foolish in the circumstances to allow the first girl he had seen in his predestined graveyard to disinter him.

He was, he felt, in danger of thinking too much

## GREEN LADIES

of this girl. If he was not careful he would think more than enough of this girl. This would be criminal for him, and a crime against the girl. He decided that all this must end.

"It's absurd. To-morrow I will go to town and fetch my books and all the grimnesses of life. You've thwacked your bladder of indolence and folly among the butterflies far too long, Peter Fool."

When Eden came out to the terrace with the coffee, instead of asking about Mrs. Patricot and the water maiden (or sylvan spirit) she kept immured in her cottage, he asked the bland old man if it was true what his medal-ribbon said (he had seen it on a Sunday waistcoat), that is, that he had fought in Burma, and if it was true, what had the fighting been like?

And from what he could gather from Eden who looked with serene and smiling eyes at the past, fighting in Burma had been like a sunset.

It has been like a big smoldering sunset, seen massively through forest mists—through the mists, of blue and pearl that rose like Homeric steam from the great caldrons that made the valleys between the immense hills. Sunsets that shone in marvelous set colors like enamel; great washes of vermilion and gold and green; hard celestial sunsets that looked like a heaven afire. Sunsets.

## GREEN LADIES

. . . The Burma war had been sunsets to Eden  
. . . that was like him. Eden wouldn't notice  
a battle for the glory in the sky.

Next morning Peter said very severely that he would go up to London for his books and grimeries. Outside it was a positive temptation in green and gold, and he had to be stern over his breakfast. . . . Then he thought,

"But I'd better write to those caretaker people."

And he wrote to those caretaker people, and felt that it would be unwise to disturb them before they got his letter. He was still being strong. But he was being wise also. He could feel he was being wise.

He walked. He walked firmly towards the station. He tried to convince himself that his return journey would not bring him near the house of Patricot. . . .

And his return journey did. But on the way he met the girl again.

She came by rather swiftly, and she was driving the car that carried her. He had an impression of a blue-clad and resilient figure at the wheel, and of a face of alert calmness above the wheel and of a general pose suggesting the active beauty of the winged victory.

She saw him, and she nodded, and she was by.

He noted that a small bright woman, who



## GREEN LADIES

looked as though she were a singularly capable grandmother who had strayed into a golfing costume, and then mounted the front seat of a car under the impression that it was the family barouche, but was not intimidated by the mistake, was beside her. Behind was the bereft figure of a chauffeur and a trunk.

He stared at the trunk. He scowled at the trunk. Was it hers? Was it Mrs. Patricot's? Was that Mrs. Patricot?

And if it was their box, that meant . . . ?

It was their box. The cottage proved it. The oak door was shut when he passed. The windows were being shut. The housekeeper, who was Hampshire, was rapidly barring out the benevolent air, now that her "ladies," who forced her to submit to the air in excess, were off and away.

Peter John walked sullenly home. He told himself time and time again,

"You didn't take 'Green Ladies' just because that chit of a girl was about. You're being a fool. You are letting your interest in this human creature get the better of you."

He was, naturally, merely interested in the girl. Merely intrigued. Nothing more. He was certain of that. He would have been extremely annoyed if he had found himself to be otherwise.

At the door of his house he hesitated. He saw



## GREEN LADIES

Eden passing in the distance. Should he speak to Eden? He decided not. He turned back and walked to the motor house.

In the garage was a thin and delicate young man, a man so thin and delicate as to be fine. He had deep brown leggings and deep brown breeches, and a brown waistcoat and a brown face. His brownness and his thinness made him look like something spindly in Chippendale. His head looked like something decorative the Chippendale maker had turned neatly to finish off the design.

"Do you know a big Vauxhall?" Peter asked this young man. "A stream-line Vauxhall, in olive-green finish."

"I know it quite well," said the young man, and then he said "sir."

"Indeed, whose is it?"

"A reactionary's," said the young man, not angrily, but with a good-natured superiority of one who could look down on reactionaries from the heaven of the I. L. P. "Talks of Empire and trip like that. Read *The Daily Telegraph*. Speak to him of Guild Socialism and he's lost. Doesn't know whether you're asking riddles or not."

"Sometimes, of course, one is," admitted Peter pleasantly.

"But then it don't matter very much," went on

## GREEN LADIES

the chauffeur. "I suppose the people for whom he drives are crusted Tories."

"Most Tories who survive are heavily crusted, Veats," said Peter. "That is how they survive. And what may their name be under their crust?"

"Oh, people called Waymsley, I understand," said Veats. "One person, to be precise." Veats thought a little and said, "sir . . . a widow, I believe. Lives over towards Milton way."

Peter stood and thought. He should not have ignored this Mrs. Waymsley. He should have accepted Eden's suggestion and called on this Waymsley. It was Mrs. Waymsley's car, therefore the Patricot régime was going to that lady's place. He should have been a friend of the widow. He should have made a place for himself there, ready to meet her. Still, it was a neglect that could be rectified.

Turning away, he asked:

"How are you getting along, Veats?"

"Very passably—sir. The country is really attractive. I *like* this country. The people are kindly, though they have no conversation. The landed interests and squireachy kill conversation, in my opinion, sir."

"And Eden and Mrs. Eden, you hit it off with them?"

"Very passably, indeed—sir. Dear old things,

## GREEN LADIES

tho' Mr. Eden is very weak on international politics."

"No complaints, then?"

"None—sir, though it's quite impossible to get *The News Statesman*. Under any circumstances."

Peter John paused without words. Could he say any words to meet a situation so momentous? He did not say them, for Veats was modern; he had already met the situation. He said,

"I've subscribed direct to the office."

In the house Peter met Eden.

"What is the name of a little lady who looks old enough to be a grandmother and young enough to know better. She wears a tweed frock, a Hom-burg hat with a feather, and it suits her, feather and all. And she . . ."

"Mrs. Waymsley, sir," said Eden, surprisingly. Not Mrs. Patricot, but Mrs. Waymsley. Peter was so taken aback, that Eden had time to say again, "Mrs. Waymsley, sir. She is a grandmother. She was married very young."

"I shall certainly go and see Mrs. Waymsley," thought Peter. "But Mrs. Patricot, where is she? Perhaps she went away early, by train, and Mrs. Waymsley was taking . . ." but he remembered that the car was traveling in the direction of the railway, and there was a trunk.

## GREEN LADIES

"Is there a 'morning train about 12:30?" he asked, mentally timing the car.

"The London train is at 11:24," said Eden.

"She was going to London," he reflected. "Mrs. Waymsley with the reactionary were driving her to the London train. And Mrs. Patricot—perhaps she went to London earlier, or yesterday . . . but Mrs. Patricot is too difficult; I wash my hands of Mrs. Patricot."

"Everybody is going to London, Eden," he said; "so why shouldn't I?"

Eden stared at him with again that look which was half reticence, half anxiety, but Peter misread it.

"But I am coming back again, for good," he went on. "I am going to bring back my books and all my grimmest things, and there will be no more silken dalliance."

And he said to himself,

"This time I mean it."

## XXI

THE study was a delectable room for work. Its serenity, its air, its light, its urbane unconcern with distractions—truly the one perfect room for good-tempered, smooth, powerful application.

Peter, having spent as much time over his Jacobean breakfast as his conscience allowed, walked to this room in which he was to perform miracles of application. He stood inside the door and stared at its consummate attraction. He examined it in all its detail. He said:

"The jolliest of work-rooms. One should accomplish immensities in it. It is the quintessence of all one dreams of for labor. A perfect room. It provokes. It entices one to begin."

He went past all the work that was enticing him to begin; went by it with no great pang of attraction. He went to the window, sat down in a chair, and stared at the New Forest.

Arranged on the desk, and in the shelves about the room, were all the books he had been specially to London to get. They were books he loved,



## GREEN LADIES

books that seemed to him to bear the seeds of great ideas. He had only to plunge into them to be pricked awake; only to taste of their pages to start his brain on the trails of a thousand absorptions and speculations.

He had only to open the fascinating yet not altogether credible fantasy of Ixtlilxochitl's—not now in this dead age could a man be born with a name so worthy as that—*Historia Chichimica*, or dip into the manuscripts which had tucked themselves away in a moldering monastic library for hundreds of years after the monk, Bernardino de Sahagun, had written them, before they were found to the astonishment and admiration of the world; he had only to scratch at the fine imaginative soil of Lopez Cogolludo's *Historia de Yucatan*, a book so rare that he ought not to have a copy (yet he had a copy), to find himself off on the scent of rare half-forgotten, half-discovered things once more.

Just one fillip to an appetite jaded by the massy events of war, and civilization, and the renting of "Green Ladies," and a dalliance after a slim figure, and he'd be back again, not on the old trail, the trail that led over hot and stinging tropics and stretches, or through the steamy half nights of the tropic bush, that, alas, was forbidden, that was his tragedy, but back on the glowing, lambent trail



## GREEN LADIES

which he could clear with his pen, and by which he could trace and expose clearly for the world the details of the long-vanished splendors. With his pen he could set down the dead dramas of races gone, in a way to stir a living world. He had only to turn to that gorgeous pageant of books. . . .

And he sat and stared at the wavering gold-green of the New Forest.

They were all there, arranged and eager for him. Books that carried forgotten history in a triumphal march of color and of trumpets. Books that rang with the brazen calls of circumstance and pomp. The *Antiguedades Peruanas* of Don Mariano Rivero; the *Relación de los Costumbres Antiguas de los Naturales del Peru*; the steady, careful writings of the old Jesuits, the old Augustinians and the other clerics who civilized and converted a new world with the labor of their hearts, and wrote down the glittering details of its life even as they labored.

There on the attractive, green-topped desk was the work of love of Juan José Betanzos—Juan José Betanzos, a name to roll on the tongue, and he had married an Inca princess and he had penned an account of her gentle race out of the glowing of his heart. There were the books of all the pundits, Spanish, French, and German, the perfect English books of Clements, Markham,

## GREEN LADIES

and the Hakluyt translations of which the English knew so little.

And there, in a score of fat, oblong notebooks, with edges slightly eaten away by tropic bug, were his own contributions to the brave mass of colorful, antique knowledge; his own gleanings, his own annotations to this panorama of history, his own probings after truth, won in adventure and toil, won in spite of fever and the knife edge threat of death.

All the worthy things that a man might do were there, waiting for but the dip of a pen in ink. And Peter John made no movement towards ink. He sat smoking a cigarette that tasted flat and unfriendly, and he stared at the distant jeering leaves of the New Forest.

He had but to shift in his seat to see about him mementos of a score of brave marches, tangible reminders that would take him back to days of bold, dogged endeavor under a scorching sun or amid the fever-thrilled mists of the forest ruins.

On brackets on the walls were mirrors of polished stone, into which the long-gone beauty of the dead had gazed, and seen herself fair and conquerant. There, near the mirrors, were the hammered jewels which had decked beauty, ear-rings, necklets, bosses, shining now with the star memory of fine yet forever faded eyes. These were

## GREEN LADIES

from the high lands of old Peru, from the land of the old, the vanished Chibchas.

On one shelf was pottery from the Inca hills, red and black and gray, painted and terra cotta; and there were eerie yet exquisite statuettes of mercury and gold, fused in furnaces that were no longer known to the art of men. On one wall was a section of decorated stone from the huge and lovely nunnery of Chichen-Itza, that marvelous memoried place of Yucatan. There was a plaster cast of the wall-sculpture from that stupendous foot-note to history, Mitla. On those brackets were the red, yellow, and blue glaze statuettes of Zapotec, Mexico, and lording it like an arch-monster was a replica, horrible yet wonderful, of the ritual mask of Tezcatlipoca—from above those false jeweled cheeks, through those terrible bossy eyes, the butcher priest looked down as his arm went out to slay with a knife of stone his cringing victim.

Peter, indeed, did look round, did note everything, did note all the books in place, and the sheaf of pens and the virgin blotting paper. He looked about the serene and provocative room—and dug himself deeper into his easy chair.

"Everything is ready," he agreed. "Everything is attractive, and this room was simply created for work. And I'm not going to work."

## GREEN LADIES

With incurious fingers he lifted and drew through his hands some knotted pieces of finely cut hide. The strings of hide were colored, and the knots in them had been put in irregularly, and for a reason. Peter John drew the *quipos*, this letter of long ago, this written message of the Incas, through his fingers.

"What do you say, what is your message?" he wondered. "Are you a letter from a javelin man to a queen rare in her feather robe of emerald? Are you a call to arms, or a bill for ocean fish? Are you a note from a philosopher telling a fool not to be a fool, but to realize life is life and has to be lived, and that all vain repinings are simply waste of good tissue? Or are you merely an indent for labor used in the piling up of local *huacas*?"

As he drew the knotted, untranslatable message through his fingers, he saw again the journey that had given it, and many other things of its kind, to him. Looking out at the fresh and innocent green of the New Forest, he saw again the steamy levels of the tropic woods.

They had made a long scorching march up the sun-bitter hill paths with the smelly llamas of the baggage train grunting under the burdens of their small packages. They had, in time, marched down from the hills and come to the bush

## GREEN LADIES

where the llama could not go, and had gone on, carrying what they could themselves; and what the porters left the natives took. They had gone through the deep hush of the rarely trodden woods, through places where even the brazen sun could not strike, where there was no undergrowth, only vile fungus that stunk vilely if it were wounded, and where dying trunks afar gleamed eerily with phosphorescent rot.

He recalled it all with a vividness which seemed to fill the small room with the thick wet heat; the foggy airs, the dead odors of that tenebrous journey. He could see even now the single file, the sweating men, morose, superstitious, firmly convinced that they would never get back from this journey alive. They had been entirely willing to fling down their loads and to risk the demons they knew crouched in every bush shadow, if they could only break back on to the return trail that led to inhabited Peru. And he had walked behind that file with his Winchester in the crook of his arm. When a man turned he had always met the fellow's eye.

What a nightmare of stumbling and sweating and pain it had been. One of the peons had fallen into a poison vine, and had cried to heaven that he was burning in hell because of a girl he had wronged back in human land, near Corongo. Tay-



## GREEN LADIES.

leur, who had been with Peter that trip, had settled the fellow. He gave him an overdose of something accidentally, and while they waited for the brute to die, he miraculously recovered. They had not only cured him, but had won reputations as miracle workers.

They found their place in the end a small ruin, matted and obscene with vines and rank growing things. They had found a small shrine to the Sun, but they had found a thing that was even more interesting. The Sun shrine had been used by a missionary many years after its sacrificial altar to the Sun had vanished, and while this spot was still the center of a community. Sun shrine and Christ's altar remained, but nothing remained of that community. The tidal sea of vines and growing things had swept over it, and all signs of man had vanished.

Only the remnants of a little chapel, set in the heart of the ancient shrine, remained. This utterly unknown missionary had built himself a small altar, and his own altar-stone was still upon it. And there was a statue or two of saints, still reasonably intact. On clearing away the bush they found the site of his tiny humble adobe presbytery, his cooking vessels of iron and pottery, a crucifix, a section of what had been a large con-



## GREEN LADIES

ventual rosary, and deeper in the earth a bent silver chalice.

Amid the rubbish there had been an iron box, and some papers were inside. The iron had kept them intact from insects, but the all-pervading damp had found its way in and a long and perhaps carefully written diary of the lonely and isolated soul who, for his soul's ideal, had buried himself away from all his fellows, was matted and crumbled. Only here and there the stilted lettering of a Spanish word in pallid, fading ink remained of his message. There was the pulp of what had been a breviary.

That was all they found of this man's life's devotion. There was nothing more. But as they worked in that forest place, they felt that the monk watched them quietly, for his spirit was very real in that place.

Peter John, with the gaudy colored *quipos* in his hand, looked out across the serene lands towards the New Forest, and he saw again the places he must see no more. He saw the white hot sun and the mauve gloom of the deep forest, and the hanging vines starred with the faint shine of tropic flowers. He saw the hot stone walls of ancient places and the men who worked in them with marvelous patience, glad only if months of

## GREEN LADIES

careful labor brought them no more than a hint of new knowledge of the olden world.

He saw it all. He put the knotted message down; he stood up and surveyed the array of books.

"You're only ghosts, my friends," he said. "You're not real. You're but memories bitter sweet. You're only incentives to the contemplation of the damnably impossible."

He walked to the table, saw his virgin blotting pad, and the rakish parallelogram of writing paper upon it, and the sheaf of pens.

"Write a book," he scoffed. "As if there were not too many books already. As if writing a book will help a fellow who wants the moon. Only, confound it, the moon I want is the sun, the sun that ancient men adored, the golden sun that glows unwinking on the waters of high Titicaca."

He picked up the rakish parallelogram of writing paper and shoved it into a drawer.

"Something has come between me and reality," he said. "Something has come between me and my sunlight."

He did not even glance again at the room absolutely made for work. He walked out of it and out of the house, on to the terrace, into the sunlight.

## GREEN LADIES

On the terrace he stood a moment.

"Well, I ought to make myself known to Mrs. Waysley," he muttered. Immediately he felt less melancholy than he had been since breakfast.

## XXII

**M**AN proposes and man's chauffeur disposes," reflected Peter John, as he sat back in that singular attitude of aloofness, of not being there at all, proper to those occasions when one's chauffeur speaks his mind to another chauffeur.

Veats was speaking his mind to no less than the Reactionary. He was convicting that mute inglorious Conservative of being responsible for an accident that was nobody's fault.

That was how destiny was stage-managing human intentions.

Peter John had made fairly definite plans. He had decided loosely that he would run over to Mrs. Waymsley's house in the course of the afternoon, somewhere about tea time, and not before. Having decided that, here he was running into Mrs. Waymsley's automobile at a little before lunch.

It had been the type of accident that has a perfect right to happen on a road that is narrow and prone to cones. It was not truly an accident, but

## GREEN LADIES

an Act of Hampshire—where the roads are like that. Everybody had behaved in the best possible manner; both sides had been well within the legal code; only the laws of destiny cannot be circumvented by the blowing of horns or driving slow round curves.

Horns had been blown, driving had been slow, yet for all that there had come a gentle, grinding concussion and the mudguard of the olive-green Reactionary was crumpled in a ridiculous manner. And Veats began to say in very terse, cool accents, for all the world as if he were a vocal edition of one of Arnold Bennett's handbooks on the way to get the better of this world, that inefficiency invariably led to the evil end of mudguards, and that if people only kept their brains screwed up and eschewed loose thinking and loose driving, there would be fewer accident claims to pay, and the world would be a safer place for olive-green cars to live in.

Veats had an unfair advantage; he could be devastating to a chauffeur without bringing a blush to the cheek of a passenger. Reaction on his driving seat had no chance. His peculiar medieval eloquence was of a powerful kind, but the presence of owners forbade him loosing it. He spluttered. He tried to do something with the few pallid and inoffensive words that made up the rest of his vo-

## GREEN LADIES

cabulary, but the effect was feeble. If he began a sentence he had to stop speaking just about the time it became interesting, because the words he wished to employ were not at all the words of Arnold Bennett, or the words that a Tory, crusted though he or she might be, might hear—anyhow, not outside the pages of Compton Mackenzie.

The brisk, vivid little woman, who was young in everything but her age, got out of the olive-green car. She smiled up at Peter, who had joined her in the road, and she looked at Veats with the thrilled gaze of a savant examining a new species of beetle.

"I've never seen one like that before," she said to Peter.

"He's only unusual to-day; to-morrow there'll be a lot of him," Peter John told her. "He's an advance copy of a new race of chauffeurs."

"Perhaps that makes him seem a little inhuman," said the brisk grandmother. "Do you mind walking a little way away? My chauffeur wants to swear, and I think he ought to do it. My name is Waymsley."

Peter John mentioned his own name.

"Yes, I know. You're at 'Green Ladies.' Don't you love it? Only don't tell me now. I'm coming to see you one of these days and then you can do it with space and formality."



## GREEN LADIES

"It's the one thoroughly beautiful, charming and perfect place," said Peter in his own smiling manner. "Only I won't tell you that now. It's much better for you not to have the slightest idea, and then for me to spring it on you. . . . I was going to spring it on you this afternoon. I was coming to tea at 'Milton Little.' "

"You were coming? But you are, if you've made your plan. Of course I expect you to tea. How nice of you. You mustn't let a motor accident interfere with tea. And, by the way . . . " She turned back briskly towards the cars. "I think Bald's had ample time for his swear."

Bald, it was obvious, had sworn to capacity. The contest of vocabularies was ended. Both chauffeurs were standing by the olive-green car, and were in that condition of satisfied misery that only chauffeurs enjoy when they know a car is damaged and an owner will have to walk.

Both men stood looking down at the car, hands on hips, as though they were mesmerizing the brute before attempting to heal it. When the little lady and Peter John drew up to them, they stood aside respectfully, like mutes permitting the chief mourners to take one last look at the body. Mrs. Waymsley said at once:

"And why won't I be able to ride home in it?"

## GREEN LADIES

It appeared she knew chauffeurs in all their attitudes.

Veats, too full of modernity to be really helpful, raced off on a technical explanation, which sounded alarmingly like anatomy, but Bald, immaculate from learning, muttered:

"Haxile." He looked defiantly at his mistress and Peter John, and he muttered again.

"Haxile."

After a minute he also offered:

"Twisted."

Without waiting for reply he turned, walked over to the bowels of the car, and began throwing things out behind him on to the road. Only chickens and chauffeurs have this divine gift of flicking things behind them without turning round.

They stood looking at his back. And presently, amid the rain of spanners and inner tubes, his voice also came flicking to them:

"Take a nour and narf," said the voice. "At least. . . ."

Mrs. Waymsley glanced at the back, glanced at Peter's car, and glanced at Peter. Her bright eyes shone in merriment.

"Come to lunch with me as well," she said, and she took a step towards Peter's car. Peter laughed. He liked this grandmother who was younger than she ought to be. He liked her crisp-

## GREEN LADIES

ness and decision. He opened the door of his car for her.

"You can telephone to Eve Eden," said Mrs. Waymsley.

"I'll telephone," said Peter, and he got in beside her. "Does everybody in Hampshire know and understand Eve Eden?" he wondered. "And does every one use the telephone? And does every one do things with this astonishing snap and decision? One woman let me her house by telephone, another commandeers my car by magic. I thought the country was going to be restful, and it's brisk and bewildering. Have I stepped from the Arcady of London into the feverish life of the meadows? I'm beginning to suspect that the taking of 'Green Ladies' is going to be an adventure, not a retreat."

## XXIII

**M**ILTON LITTLE" was a deep, cool, reposeful house. Steep, dark trees stood over it, guarding it, but they stepped aside, and Peter had the feeling they did it every fine morning, so that its face could forever feel the sun.

It was a low, comely house of the kind the Americans name Colonial, and all people call charming.

Peter went to lunch and stayed to tea.

"No, don't go," Mrs. Waymsley had cried in her brisk manner, "that'll interrupt conversation." So he stayed on in an aurora borealis of chatter, in which the shining figments of talk were spun glowing in all colors from the very air.

The vivid old lady had immoral support in her passion for chatter from two grandchildren. Grandchildren, she explained, usually encumbered "Milton Little." Parents sent them there to keep them young.

There were two, and the one who needed a dose of youth the more, was a middle-aged man

## GREEN LADIES

of twenty-two who would be a nice boy presently, when he grew down a bit, and had overcome the handicap of a university career.

He was still in the stage that wonders whether, after all, there is any life after Oxford. Tristram Waymsley had been to war, but he had not noticed it much, it had been rather less of war than a fourth year at a university.

He was, in his way, like a brother in mind to Eden, Peter reflected. If battles in Burma had been to Eden merely sunsets, war in France had been to Tristram merely rendezvous.

Battlefields to this young man, who sat about with much of the abandoned grace of an unfolded newspaper (the floppy sort, decided Peter, that clubmen throw down in smoking-room chairs), were merely places where one met one's friends. He was under the impression that all England had gone to war to meet his friends.

He asked Peter, not if he had come across any Turks or Germans in the Dardanelles, but if he had come across Wrensley-Puke, of the Cornish Wrensley-Pukes, or Frank Lang of Balliol, or Billie Pratte.

"Most of my service in the Dardanelles was malaria," Peter had answered, wincing at "malaria." "I met few interesting human beings, ally or enemy."



## GREEN LADIES

The fatigued young man thought that malaria had been the hardest luck, but no doubt Palestine had given Peter some comforting moments. Had Peter seen anything of Goffin-Smith or Herbert Daghis. Tristram seemed certain that they must have occupied a considerable tract of the Holy Land, and could scarcely be overlooked.

"If they weren't in hospital, I fear I didn't meet them," said Peter. "My service in Palestine was extensively hospital. Malaria again." And then because he did not want to talk—for the most melancholy of reasons—on a subject mainly malarious, the conversation faded.

Conversation with this infinitely aged child had a fading quality. Peter might have kept it brisk and anecdotal by mentioning the French battlefields of 1918, where he had been, and which must have been studded with Wrensley-Pukes and Langs of Balliol. But France, too, was embittered by malaria, and he evaded it.

And besides he did not desire to talk at all of battles and friends or malaria. Certainly the least said about battlefields and the more of other things the better. He was willing to talk about anything, but most willing to talk about Hampshire, about "Green Ladies" if they liked, and rather particularly about the neighbors of "Green Ladies."

He thought they should feel it their business



## GREEN LADIES

to talk to him about the neighbors of "Green Ladies." After all, it is the duty to which the Bible gives unqualified support, for man to know his neighbors, and to be on the best terms with them. He craved to know his neighbors, or anyhow, as a beginning, one of his neighbors.

There was the neighbor, a little to the west—in the first house to the west of him—in that cottage was surely a neighbor he ought to know, and who they should make known to him. And if they were not inclined to do their duty in this respect, he was going to prompt them.

He would have to do it gently, delicately, for after all he could not be *gauche*; he could not rush things, he dare not show an excessive interest in a girl whose name he did not know.

And then—and then, slowly, delicately, circumspectly, as he went, wasn't there something barring his way? Wasn't there something elusive in the serene charm of this friendliness of grandmothers and grandchildren? Was he making a mistake or was there really behind the bright meals and the chatter something deliberately withheld, something of the air of reticence that seemed to be filling the part of the hemisphere called Hampshire?

He made his small allusive advances. He talked of Veats and Veats' opinion of the Reac-

## GREEN LADIES

tionary who was master of the olive-green Vauxhall. He talked of this solely and simply because thus having referred to an encounter with Mrs. Waymsley and an obvious trunk, Mrs. Waymsley might have occasion to explain that obvious trunk and its obvious owner.

But Mrs. Waymsley did not explain. Not the car, not the trunk, not the girl in the car engaged her attention. The modernity of Veats alone seemed to captivate her. Veats became the nozzle for a fountain of bright comment. It was very charming and thoroughly baffling.

And when he talked of the cliffs and his walks along the cliffs the sparkling grandmother talked of cliffs, too. She fastened on to cliffs, with, what Peter thought, an abnormal tenacity. A cliff, Peter had thought up to this, was a meek thing to talk about. The cliff as a topic has strict limitations, but Mrs. Waymsley centered on cliffs. Merely cliffs, not the houses on the little crumbling cliff, or the inmates of the houses, but cliffs *solus*, their attributes and their beauties and their histories.

She said—and did she or did she not do it with diplomacy aforethought?—too much concerning cliffs and too little concerning the dwellers on cliffs.

It was no doubt entertaining, and perhaps important that he should know that the cliff, if one

## GREEN LADIES

could call it a cliff, over to the east by the Beaulieu river, had not always been a cliff. In its dim youth it had gone on being just land. It had gone on across the Solent (only there had been no Solent then) to the Isle of Wight. And it had formed, at least that was the impression he gathered, a sort of tremendous *via sacra* passing from the Island to Stonehenge. Along that road, when the Sun was near its time for sacrifices, barbarians poured northward to gather in the far stone circle on Salisbury Plain.

It was engaging and thrilling; yes, the way this vivid, vigorous grandmother told of it made it thrilling, but wasn't it perhaps something more than thrilling? Mightn't this hypothetical road be merely so much dust flung into the face of his curiosity?

He wondered. So often, it seemed to him, the conversation twisted away from the things he desired to explore, turned aside into the placid deeps of general chatter where there were no thrills of revelation, and neighbors did not figure.

And Peter half suspected that the bright little grandmother was the twister. It was hard to say. She had the divine gift of skating off at angles, and that might equally be uninspired irrelevancy or calculated cleverness.

He could not decide if it were one or the other.

## GREEN LADIES

But he could decide that he was learning nothing of what he wanted to learn. It was either one of those incalculable days when all things seem against one and by which one's will is apparently baffled, or, indeed by the high gods, or there was in fact a diplomatic reticence in the people about him.

And as he wondered if this were so, quite unexpectedly, quite dazzlingly, the conversation went galloping along a road he had not dreamed of taking, and his mind was out and away from the old problem and chasing a new.

They had all been talking about his landlords, the de Pierres, but landlords do not naturally thrill one. Peter had heard that the de Pierres had lived honorable but inconspicuous lives, and that now the de Pierres were ending.

It came out suddenly, abruptly, that Phillippa was the last of her kind. And then, even more abruptly and more astonishing, Gabrielle's litany of Phillippa had broken and burst over the luncheon table.

Gabrielle was the other encumbering grandchild; she was a bubbler in conversation. She either ran dry or ran to ecstasy. And over Phillippa she ran to ecstasy. She cried with a sudden, an amazing, a petrifying fervor,

"Oh, but Phillippa is *the* most perfect thing!

## GREEN LADIES

She's so beautiful I want to weep for my snub nose every time I look at her. And such an exquisite skin. But, Mr. John, you do agree with me, don't you?"

"I agree with every word," cried Peter; an entirely taken-aback Peter; an entirely mystified Peter.

"But, Mr. John——" began the cheery grandmother, looking at him with her sharp eyes.

"And her figure, too. Her slimness, the way she carries herself?"

"Perfect," admitted Peter John, more amazed than ever.

"Mr. John," demanded Mrs. Waymsley, with her bright eyes fixed on his face. "Are you misleading a grandchild? Have you met Phillippa?"

"No," said Peter John lamely, and ruefully.

"Oh, fraud," bubbled Gabrielle. "But didn't you? Not this time, but surely——?"

"Don't tempt him, Gabrielle," said Mrs. Waymsley, briskly. "He'll swear to anything simply to make you enthusiastic. And in any case you are using too many adjectives and taking too few strawberries."

Was that a deliberate twist? Gabrielle at once recovered her common sense and her control of the dish of strawberries. And there had been that natural collapse of talk that comes when the



## GREEN LADIES

thread is snapped. And after they had gone on quite serenely talking of other things.

But was it a deliberate snapping of the thread, or was it but an accident which might happen to the best conversations? Peter for the life of him could not have told.



## XXIV

**A**ND then Peter was not noticing the action or the reticences of the conversation now. His world was crowded to the sky with this new vision of a landlord.

He forgot aught else, he forgot—yes, even that—his Quest of the Nereid; why he had come to this house, what he had hoped to learn. He could only contemplate this unexpected figure in landlords.

His landlord lovely! And he had never even dreamed of any landlord being lovely. He had never occupied his mind with his landlord. One does not dwell on such mysteries; and his had been but a dim wraith of plain middle-age lurking in the dusty shadows of existence proper to landlords.

His landlord had been as all landlords; a myth without features—and yet she was beautiful. Middle-aged no doubt she remained, but she was beautiful, and, yes, her figure was slim. It was simply bewildering as a revelation.

For the remainder of lunch his bright talk was

## GREEN LADIES

false currency, his mind was dwelling upon the uniqueness of his discovery. He told himself he had not paid enough attention to the de Pierre side of "Green Ladies," and he must make amends.

"I must find out everything about this Miss Phillippa de Pierre and I will," he told himself.

After lunch, in a big, comely room that glowed like a bowl of cool water in the level sunlight, they sat and chattered again. They talked about South America, because, it appeared, they knew about him, had heard something of his doings in South America.

"One does hear," said Mrs. Waymsley, and her eyes twinkled as though she had some private joke. "There's 'Who's Who' and people who know, and friends in London who give you away—one can't keep secrets now-a-days."

So of South America inevitably they talked.

He told them of his discovery of South America. It had been rather in the manner of the discovery of Brazil, an accident.

"But you can't possibly go out and suddenly meet a large piece of continent by chance," said Gabrielle. "Brazil seems too big to be an accident."

"Oh, you mustn't be put off by size," Peter assured her, "and as large as it was, it was like

## GREEN LADIES

that. The Portuguese seamen who first arrived at the coast had to be convinced it was Brazil. You see they were perfectly certain it wasn't. To them it was the East Indies, because that was what they wanted. Being human, they took it amiss that they had made a mistake of a continent or so."

"And so you set sail for the East Indies and found yourself in Yucatan," teased Gabrielle.

"No, I set sail for oil and found Teotihuacan. I went to Mexico to look at an oil district and instead looked at the *teocallis*—the pyramids of the Sun and the Moon at San Juan, Teotihuacan. I had had a young man's idea that oil would be rather interesting and it wasn't in the least. I hadn't any ideas about Mexican ruins at all, because I didn't know they existed—and they were tremendously amusing. So I forgot all about oil, and went on looking at and grubbing among antiques in Mexico and Central America and down to Peru, and I became so absorbed in dead things that I never noticed life—not until the war called my attention to the fact that I was existing in a living world. Then I came home."

"But you'll go back," said the young girl with a sudden darting enthusiasm that wounded Peter like the thrust of a spear, "you'll go back to that wonderful place?"

## GREEN LADIES

And Peter speaking softly because of the pain she had caused him, said,

"No. No, I'm not going back." But his heart said, "I can't; I may not."

And then, as he had expected, this talk about South America brought them to "Green Ladies" once more. He had willingly talked of South America, for he saw that it must lead back to Hampshire. Hampshire as contrasted with the deep heat, and the forest charms of Aztec and Inca lands. He had played for this. Out of their ballad of the beauties of "Green Ladies" he felt he could extract the essential information concerning Miss Phillippa of "Green Ladies."

He would make them tell him everything about her. He wanted to know why one who was beautiful gave up such a setting so adequate to beauty. He wanted to know what was her alternative living place, and what she did, and how she lived. He wanted to know everything. He wanted this thoroughly unexpected landlord put before his eyes as a real thing, an actual creature of flesh and blood.

So he said with all the innocence of the serpent, "Yes, 'Green Ladies' is charming, and it makes me feel guilty."

"Guilty," burst Gabrielle, "but it couldn't. Happy, yes, it would make you happy, I can un-

## GREEN LADIES

derstand it doing that; but it can't possibly make you guilty."

"But perhaps happiness is the root of guilt. It quite often is. You see, isn't it some one else's happiness? I feel I'm living in another's paradise. Eden and Eve Eden, and the view and the look of the sea, and the sun on it, and the prettiness of the flowers—all of it. Doesn't it all belong to other spirits than mine? It's because it's such a beautiful old place that I feel an interloper in another's Arcady."

And as he said this, he watched the eager, ingenuous, pretty, sympathetic face of Gabrielle. And he did not feel a serpent at all; or rather he felt intensely that he hoped he had been a thorough-going serpent; that he had played on her chatter strings and that she would blurt out everything. And he had. She began,

"But, Mr. John, you mustn't feel like that. It isn't that way at all. You know Phillippa really can't bear——"

And before she could tell him of Phillippa, and of what Phillippa couldn't bear, Mrs. Waymsley said decisively, that "Green Ladies" wasn't old at all. Old! its youth was almost unseemly.

Peter John, torn away from Phillippa and what Phillippa could not bear, blinked at the brisk, amazing young old thing who was either draw-



## GREEN LADIES

ing herrings across his path with astonishing nimbleness, or being irrelevant with a zest equally astonishing, but being, whatever she was, entirely effective as a baffler of curiosities.

She was quizzing him with her bright polished eyes (was there or was there not a twinkle in them?), and she was saying,

"Old place. But it's an upstart of a place, as Hampshire goes. You can tick off its age in centuries on the thumbs of both hands. You're another who has been hoodwinked by that Gothic."

"I confess I was rather hoodwinked by that Gothic," admitted Peter, surrendering unconditionally. The Gothic, which was incorporated in the structure of "Green Ladies," was, of course, interesting; Gothic that hoodwinks is more than ordinarily interesting, and if he could not hear why Miss Phillippa could not bear—whatever she could not bear in connection with "Green Ladies"—then perhaps hoodwinking Gothic was a good substitute. "Yes, I confess I was entirely hoodwinked. That Gothic seems to me thoroughly responsible Gothic. I decided that it was good ecclesiastical Gothic of the fourteenth century. I had no suspicion of that Gothic. I admitted it to my bosom."

"And you thought it probably stolen by the original de Pierres from Beaulieu Abbey?" sug-



## GREEN LADIES

gested Tristram languidly. "Everybody likes to think it was stolen and everybody hopes Beaulieu was the place from which it was plundered."

"Well, I did play with the idea of wicked, but tasteful de Pierre of Tudor times, making a very good haul from Beaulieu. And after all, is not Beaulieu or fourteenth century merely hood-wink?"

"It's undoubtedly thirteenth century," said Mrs. Waymsley, "and it is ecclesiastical, and the rest is not romance but humdrum."

"And also," answered Peter, "a bit of a riddle. It is real Gothic and yet not real. It is romantic and yet humdrum."

"It is real but not Beaulieu, not stolen," said the old lady. "You can console yourself with the thought that 'Green Ladies' is one of the few houses or estates not stolen from some one. The de Pierres were not monastery thieves. They have always owned that land. They've lived there, though not in 'Green Ladies,' but in another house——"

"The Dower House, wasn't it?" asked Tristram lazily. And Peter thought he caught a sudden alarm in the grandmother, a quick glance thrown at the young man, and a short breath of hesitation before the brisk and vivid old thing answered; and as he saw that he asked himself,

## GREEN LADIES

"Why doesn't she want the Dower House mentioned? Where is the Dower House?" But already she was saying,

"Yes, they lived in the original Dower House, at first. But about two hundred and fifty years ago, a de Pierre built 'Green Ladies,' because he liked the view, and because he had some Gothic."

"The view I can understand," said Peter. "The Gothic, no. How did this de Pierre come by thirteenth century Gothic?"

"He bought it."

"Alas, for the charm of thievery! Alas, for romance!"

"Yes, it was a rigidly dull affair—as dull as weighing sugar. It's only illuminated by the appalling lack of taste of a Lord Abbott. A new broom of a Lord Abbott, who lived in France, and yet kept his soul unspotted from the beauty of the world. Think of the heroic quality of that man, to live in the land of Rheims and Amiens, and yet to be blind to Gothic."

"A colossal statue of a Lord Abbott of the Philistines," suggested Peter.

"Oh, but that puts him nicely in his place. Anyhow, he sold his Gothic. He hungered for something new and crude and unsuitable, probably in the Montmaitre-Michael-Angelo style, and he pulled down his cloisters and his chapter

## GREEN LADIES

house, and got rid of them for money to pay for his new abominations. And this de Pierre who had some taste and adored Gothic when he saw it, partly ruined posterity but bought the Gothic and shipped what he could over to Hampshire. Since he had not enough for a house he used what he had, and put the most seemly structure he could get invented round it. That is your 'Green Ladies.' "

"It is a blow," murmured Peter. "It really is attractive to feel that some one reprehensible in the past age committed a crime for which we, unsullied by the guilt, can reap the reward. And in 'Green Ladies,' humdrum and beautiful as it was, the de Pierres lived and flourished until when?"

Peter John was asking deliberately. He was, he thought, seeing light. Thrillingly he was beginning to understand. He was beginning to see through the veils of unsaid things; he was beginning to find out what lurked behind the reticences. And what he was beginning to understand, to see and find out was so amazing, so unexpected, so delightful, that he felt he must be certain. So he put that decisive question,

"So they lived and flourished there until—when?"

The adroit, the diplomatic grandmother was at a disadvantage, she was entangled in cups by

## GREEN LADIES

this time. Her wits were demanded by the deliberative rubrics of tea. But she jerked at him her ambiguity—or was it an inconsequence?

"Yes, they lived there—always."

"Tea will possess you altogether in a moment, then I shall strike at your weaker member," thought Peter, and he watched her becoming involved in the duties of the teapot. Then, coolly, he said to Gabrielle,

"And how long ago was it since she lived at 'Green Ladies'?"

"That cake-stand, please, my child," said Granny to Gabrielle.

"Who lived?" demanded Gabrielle as she went to the cake-stand.

"Miss Phillippa," said Peter sweetly.

"Would you mind——" began the nimble old lady.

"Miss—Phillippa!" cried Gabrielle, staring at Peter in astonishment. "Why——?"

"Would you mind letting the blind down a little, Gabrielle? The sun——"

Gabrielle went to the blind. But Peter would not be beaten. He stared at Tristram. His eyes said, "I repeat my question," to the eyes of Tristram. And Tristram answered languidly,

"How long ago? Well, you know Phillippa used to go to 'Green Ladies' when she got leave

## GREEN LADIES

from her hospital. As a matter of fact, I thought she was there this time. You see, I didn't know you had taken the place."

"And as I was there, she went——?"

"To the Dower House, I suppose."

And Peter sat back with a beating heart. "Well, I'm blest," he was thinking. "Well, really this is astounding. It's absurd, it's incredible, but I really do believe——"

He was thinking that he had made a gorgeous find. And though Mrs. Waymsley thrust tea upon him and turned upon him a crisp, understanding and yet enigmatical smile—a smile that seemed to say, "You've found out something, and yet what have you found out?"—a smile that seemed to surrender and yet baffle—he could go no farther into the mystery for the greatness of the discovery he had made.

And in the flights of conversation that followed, conversation that did not touch on the mystery of mysteries—was that crisp, innocent diplomat of a grandmother controlling it?—he could only think, "Miss Phillippa. She was thought to be staying at 'Green Ladies' when I was staying there. . . ."

And when he reached "Green Ladies" he said to himself,

"The Dower House, where is this Dower



## GREEN LADIES

House? That, I think, will give us the answer to the riddle."

He turned up the Dower House on an old map. And he saw the Dower House. The Dower House was a biggish cottage overlooking the cliff some little way to the West of "Green Ladies." It was the first house on the road to the West.

It was the one veritable cottage of Mrs. Patricot.

Peter John stared down at it.

"Miss Phillippa beautiful and slim . . . and the way she carries herself . . . and the de Pierres lived at the Dower House when not at 'Green Ladies.' And Miss Phillippa was thought to be staying here when really I was staying here. Miss Phillippa . . . Heavens above—that girl, *she's* not a nereid, nor a hamadryad, nor an enigma—she's a landlord."



## XXV

PETER JOHN turned his face from the wide sea, the wide sea that broke softly with a slurring, meditative undertone away in the darkness beneath the little crumpled cliff. He turned his face from the splendid expanse of warm and sleepy water, stirring with an indolent restlessness in the faint silver of the decreescent moon.

He turned because in the infinite warm silence of the night he had heard a rustle beside him; the veriest ghost of a sound, the shadow of a whisper breathed against the scented texture of the night. Just the rustle of silk, just a flourish of gossamer on gossamer, and,

"Good evening," said a gentle voice, and beside him, slim and erect, delicate and almost impalpable, a thing of the night, woven of its mistiness and its mystery, was a girl.

He could see the faint brightness of her face and her shoulders. And about her dainty and upstanding body a dress, as vague as mist, caught the faint and elusive light and made about her

## GREEN LADIES

a soft opalescence, an ethereal penumbra, so that Peter John could not help thinking, as his heart leaped on a pace or two,

"I wasn't far wrong—a nereid, a hamadryad, a thing of spirit, a thing spun of moonlight and shadow and dreams, she's all that. She's more than anything one can set one's tongue to. She's a wood spirit, a sea spirit, a cliff spirit, if one likes, in spite of leases and houses to let." Aloud he said, without a tremor of his thoughts getting into his voice,

"Good evening," and he made the first movement towards scrambling to his feet.

"No, not that—please. Don't get up," she cried and as he still moved, "please don't make me feel that I have interrupted your night."

She said this with that fleck of unuttered laughter that gave all she said a touch of individuality, and she made a tiny gesture enfolding the night, the swinging sea and the slur of the veiled moonlight on it, and the hidden land and the scented darkness—the whole thing. The whole thing which had been getting into his very bones, into which he had been sinking with a gentle, melancholy sweetness.

"You don't interrupt, or no more than is good for me," Peter told her. "And then shouldn't I be the one to ask forgiveness? To walk out on

## GREEN LADIES

your particular cliff of contemplation, and find some one sitting stolidly in the very pathway of your meditations—well, isn't that rather an outrage?"

"I could have taken my meditations along another pathway," she said with a tiny smile in her voice, "for I saw your cigarette. And—well, an interruption is no more than is good for me."

"You too?" he said, laughing.

"We are both in the same gallery," she answered softly. "And since you think you must get up . . . there!"

She sat down on the little, crumbling cliff. She sat down finally, deliberately, a little distance away from him.

"Thank you," said Peter, and his heart said more than a mere "Thank you"; it was thrilling with a sense of his astonishing luck. "Thank you. Could I confess, you won't think me too selfish if I confess, that I was willing to stay seated? It's such a perfection of a night."

"It's an English night," she agreed. "It's worth enjoying."

"Yes, it's worth enjoying. There's nothing, after all, quite like an English summer night. It is tender and gentle, and the mists of England soften it to its own grave, delicate sweetness. Its light and its texture are serene, and its stars are

## GREEN LADIES

soft and shy. And there's a modesty about it, a fragrance of modesty that gives it its quiet, quick, colorful charm. It is a dainty thing, a reticent thing. There is no conscious effort to excel, it is beautiful without being exotic, or striking, or blatant. It is soft and sentimental and gracious like its soft and sentimental stars."

"And melancholy a little?"

"Perhaps more than a little, that's its sentimentality—the Anglo-Saxon sentimentality that makes the whole world a dream."

They sat silently for a moment, Peter supremely conscious of the night, supremely conscious of his proximity to her, and his immense good luck at being here in this blessed night, and near to her.

The sheer surprise of it was the charm of it. He had thought her millions and millions of miles away, that is, in London at least. Yesterday, at "Milton Little," when they had talked about her, there had been no hint that she would at any time be so near, that she would be coming back so soon. She had vanished out of his world with her trunk, and her trunk had suggested that her vanishing would be a permanency.

And yet, despite the augury of that ineffable trunk, here she was sitting, slim and alert, not three paces from him. He could see her face, pale, vague and spiritual under the dark massing

## GREEN LADIES

of her hair, and see the slim poise of her white throat upon her white shoulders. She sat with the ingenuous, comely ease of a boy; knees drawn up, and white arms clasped around knees. And she showed a complete and boyish composure, turning to him in the friendliest, naturalest manner, turning from him to gaze out over the immense moon-hazy distances of waters.

Peter thought, as they sat there very quietly for half a minute, or perhaps more than half a minute, that the whimsical impulse which had brought him out after dinner into the half-dusk to look at her house had had the inspiration of good fortune. And so had the impulse that caused him to sit down on the cliff to watch the day stray slowly into night.

"There is," he thought, "a Puckishness, a magic about this place, about 'Green Ladies,' that makes a sport of chance—oh, and of resolutions too."

For he recalled that somewhere in the infinite remoteness of three or four days ago he had resolved that his curiosity—naturally, it could be no more than the pleasantest, idlest curiosity—concerning this girl was becoming too much of an interrupting thing. Was making him unsettled and restless, whereas he had come to the country for a settled eternity of resolute rest.



## GREEN LADIES

As he thought that, the astonishing girl said astonishingly:

"There's a sort of Puckishness, a sort of magic about the night, don't you think?" ("Good Lord, are you a sibyl, too, can you read my thoughts?" reflected Peter in amaze.) "It plays the wildest tricks with one's good intentions." ("Good Lord," Peter's mind stammered once more.) "Yesterday I made up my mind that I could no longer endure the town. I said I would come down to the country and live a human life, a life of serenity and brightness and cheerfulness. I said I would go down to—to Hampshire, and renew my vivacity and spirit. And down I came to-day for good." (Peter's heart appreciated that.) "And all this afternoon I have been singing with satisfaction. And now . . . the first night, the first veil of darkness, the first sight of the country moon, and—and I am in a state when an interruption is no more than is good for me. Is human nature ridiculous, or is this place magical?"

"Well," said Peter, "well I think it is the place." He looked across at her, and wondered suddenly, should he? Should he say what he wanted to say? How would she take it? She had a sense of humor, a sense of whimsicality, yes, but dare he?

She was saying:



## GREEN LADIES

“You think it is the place? Why? Have you run to earth its familiar spirit, its Puck?”

And Peter John was reflecting “Well, the time is appropriate, and the very atmosphere is in alliance and I’m certain she has a sense of humor. I’m of a mind to risk it.”

“Well, yes and no,” he began. “Perhaps there isn’t an essential spirit, but there is—there is that Puckish sense. Why—why, you find me here, even now, and even at this spot, mourning the end of a vision, the death of a legend; oh, not an old legend, one but about to be born.”

“That sounds the most tragic of all deaths.”

“And the most tragic of all ends, it was an apparition laid”—and he didn’t look at her as he said it—“laid by a telephone wire.”

It seemed to him that there was a sudden perceptible silence, as if her indolent attention had been arrested abruptly, as though she had stiffened spiritually. He looked across at her, and she was looking out to sea. And he thought, “I believe she understands. She is so witty and capable, she is sure to understand. Should I risk it, even, will she let me go on?”

And after a perceptible minute, she said,

“O-oh,” and then almost at once, with a little lift of her head and a little touch of laughter, “Well—? What was this ghost the telephone

## GREEN LADIES

wire laid—telephone wire, is it possible that could be so potent?"

("I'm in for it," said Peter to Peter. "Pray heaven I make the best of it.")

"Well, did I say a ghost; not really a ghost; rather let us say a spirit, an elemental thing. And then, it might be said, that the thing wasn't there—only I thought it was there. I thought that the lady who is called on the Amazon 'The Princeza' had come to live at 'Green Ladies,' either she or her sister. I thought I saw her there."

"All the way from the Amazon. But I am interested. Tell me——"

"On the Amazon, you know, they give you a fruit, and you eat the fruit calmly, for it is pleasant, until somebody shows you what is on the fruit, and tells you the reason it is on it, and then you eat no more, unless you are a barbarian, a Goth, or a sort of metaphysical cannibal."

"The fruit makes you that—a metaphysical cannibal?"

"It is, of course, a matter of temperament. What is on the fruit is the profile of a girl, the faint, delicate profile of a girl, a sweet and unmistakable outline. And when you mention that this is a rather remarkable thing, they tell you over there amid the still, hot mystery of the tropic trees, that it is not remarkable at all. That since

## GREEN LADIES

this is the fruit of The Princeza, it cannot help bearing her countenance.

"They will tell you the story of the Princeza. She lived long ago in the heavy and mystical heats: among the deep and suggestive silences of the untrammelled woods. They will tell you how this royal woman, young and beautiful, and ardent, scorned all the heroes of her land and turned her heart from the love of men to the love of a noble tree.

"This noble tree, so straight, so magnificent and massive had won her heart. She could not love in the way of other maids because of her infatuation for its sumptuous, upspringing strength. They tell you how this maid languished for her great tree, how she staved off love until love became stronger than she, and how one day she vanished from the sight of men.

"She vanished, and man saw her no more. She had gone into the heart of the immemorial woods and there she had joined herself to her lover, and there forever she remained. She was gone and no human eyes looked upon her again . . . but man knew where she had gone, and what was the end of her. For a day came when the men of the Amazon picked the fruit of a tree, and they saw on the fruit the outline of a girl, the faint, delicate profile of a girl. And they knew then that the

## GREEN LADIES

Princeza had come into her own and into love. . . .”

“She was a fortunate Princeza,” said the girl softly, in the little silence that followed. And—  
“Well—you thought that she had come to ‘Green Ladies’ . . . Why?”

“She or her sister,” said Peter gently. “It seemed to me that I saw her—one of them, a sister of her spirit—amid the trees, looking out at me from among the trees that stand about Green Ladies.

“Oh, it was only once, on the first night I was there, and it was only for a moment, the barest moment. But in that instant I thought I saw her standing quietly, movelessly against the straight trunks of the pines, just the shadow of a shadow, just the wraith of a watching figure, just a shade so vague and ethereal that it seemed part of the trees, part of them and their shade.

“But even as I looked this shadow that had seemed to me one with the trees, a tree spirit, a shy, graceful elemental thing—even as I looked she was not there. She was gone. I saw her no more.”

He stopped with pulse beating perhaps, no, certainly, a little faster than normal. He looked at the girl and waited. She must know, she must understand, and would she be furious, or—?

## GREEN LADIES

She laughed, she laughed softly, as one seeing a joke. She had, heaven be praised, a blessed sense of humor. She asked,

"But you didn't see her again, and yet—yet you are certain that she was not The Princeza, or her sister, or any fabled wood thing. You did imply, didn't you, that she ultimately proved nothing of the sort, that the first telephone wire that came along exposed her, showed her up as an impostor? Well . . . ? How? Why . . . ?"

"That is where the tragedy lies. That is where one's sense of fairy gets a shock. No, she was not an elemental, not The Princeza, not a hamadryad, not a wood fay, nor anything preternatural. She was human, she was everyday. She was . . . "

"Not humdrum? Not commonplace?"

"She was just a landlord," he said and he looked across at the girl.

He stopped. He left it at that.



## XXVI

**W**OULD she take it well? Would she take it ill?

They sat silent in the intense warm quietude of the moon-misty night. The girl was very still, gazing out into the enormous darkness of the sea. She did not move, she did not speak. Peter looking at her felt that fate and friendship were hanging before him in the trembling balance of the night. Which way would the balance fall . . . for,

"I have told you something about yourself that you, for some definite reason of your own, did not wish me to find out," he reflected. "What is your attitude towards that? Will it be the dignity of chagrin, or the humor of resignation? Will you snub or will you laugh?"

And suddenly the girl laughed.

She laughed. It was young laughter, it was laughter clear and spontaneous and generous.

"Oh," she cried. "A landlord. You found that your elemental amid the trees was no more than that. And, even remembering the telephone



## GREEN LADIES

wires, how did you do it? Even a telephone wire—how does that figure as the machine of the gods? How can that shatter a shadow to make a landlord?"

"It was—will you permit the expression?—a connecting link.

"It was just the link between surmise and fact, it was the link that explained the otherwise inexplicable, and finally it was the one link needed, the link between 'Green Ladies' and the house of this landlord."

The girl waited while Peter had time to count twenty heart beats, and then with the neatest show of perplexity she shook her head.

"No," she said, "it explains nothing. Please ——?"

("Does it explain nothing?" wondered Peter, "or do you want to find out how much it explains to me?")

"But wouldn't another story bore you?" he said aloud.

"Oh there is another story, a long one?"

"Longer than the melancholy history of the Princess who loved a tree."

"It won't bore me," she said.

"To begin," began Peter. "In the middle . . ."

"But in the middle?" she asked. "Is that usual?"

## GREEN LADIES

"Quite usual, though of course, my candor is not usual. It is a trick of story makers to say that they are beginning at the beginning, or, if they want to cut out an æsthetic dash, to say that they are beginning at the end and unfolding facts from effect to cause. But whatever they say they begin in the middle. It is the only way to get to the living heart of the thing. It is the only way, in this case, to give you any impression at all of the mystery within a mystery that surrounded the letting of 'Green Ladies.'"

"But taking a house, can there be anything mysterious in that? Isn't it one of the several deadly commonplace things?"

"That's it. That's the very essence of the mystery. It should have been deadly and commonplace and drawn-out and tedious. Even from the very circumstances it should have been more deadly commonplace, more tediously drawn out than usual.

"Consider what happened. I was known to the agents only as a person wanting permits to view houses. I viewed 'Green Ladies' as a strolling house hunter, found that it was the one paradisial house in the kingdom, and refused to leave it.

"Absolutely I refused to quit it. I put a pistol at the head of the caretaker who had been placed there specially to guard the house against such

## GREEN LADIES

rogues as I, I forced him to let me steal it and stay in it. And then I put another pistol to the heads of the lawyers and agents. I wired them, I told them curtly I was in their house and meant to keep it. I told them that not even the law or the need of signing leases would make me leave it. I told them peremptorily that they must come to me, not I to them, if papers were to be signed. And they came without a murmur.

"Consider that, they didn't know me from Adam. I had no references, no apparent standing or backing. And I had burst my way into their house. They accepted it all with a criminal meekness; they never protested. They never demanded guaranties or suggested delays. Blindly they treated with me, and in twenty minutes they had tamely handed over the house. What do you think of it?"

"I should think of it," said the girl, with a catch of laughter in her voice to take the edge off her serious tone, "I should think of it as prodigious good luck. And I should be careful not to quarrel with it."

"Oh, it was amazing good luck; immense luck, I admit it, and I'm the last to quarrel with it. But all the same it was preposterous luck too; even with the explanation they gave."

"So—there was an explanation?"

## GREEN LADIES

"Well, yes, naturally. But even as an explanation not the best of its kind, an explanation with qualifications. There was this telephone wire. They put it all down to the telephone wire. Everything had been settled across it. It appeared prodigious good luck had ranked itself solidly on my side. My landlord—" and here Peter paused instinctively, he had to name names, and yet it was a cold-blooded thing to do, even under the cover of this warm and scented darkness—"my landlord, a Miss de Pierre . . ."

"Miss—who?" cried the girl with a sudden astonishment in her voice.

"Miss Phillippa," said Peter, and he wondered whether he should have spoken the name. He wondered whether this cool, offhand, aloof mentioning of the name might not affront her. But the thing was done. "Miss Phillippa, as Eden calls her; Miss Phillippa de Pierre, my landlord."

"I see . . . go on . . . " said the girl in a voice just a little agitated he thought, as perhaps it had a right to be.

"My landlord had talked over the wire, and she had settled it all. I was to have 'Green Ladies.' If I wanted to have 'Green Ladies' at once, no barrier was to be put in my way. The thing had been taken completely out of the hands of obstacle creating lawyers. And there was the won-

## GREEN LADIES

der again. My landlord at that lucky moment was not only within telephone call, but my landlord knew of me. My landlord, even, had met me. She had seen me, had found me not so bad a tenant, and had issued her commands, all this the lawyers told me. An astonishing mystery, for, as far as I knew, I had never met her, and as far as I could see there was no reason for assuming that she had ever heard of such a person as myself."

"But isn't that rather a false assumption?" said the girl gently and yet impersonally, as though weighing the matter solely on its merits. "In these days every one is known to every one. And then one sees people, say in town, if only for a few minutes in a crush, and sometimes one remembers. And then, if you don't mind my saying it, you've done some things that people can call to mind. You weren't altogether unknown to me, for example."

"Oh, I don't think I should have forgotten," began Peter, and then saw the way the wind was blowing. "I mean, I think I should have remembered enough of such a meeting not to be so very much at sea as I was. And then—and then—I don't think Miss—my landlord referred to any meeting in town."



## GREEN LADIES

He paused, perhaps she would speak. She did not.

"You see, I found out more yesterday. I found it out at that charming and irresistibly young old Mrs. Waymsley's. From no more than a hint here and there I found out something about my landlord. I found out that she had been down here, in this district, at the very moment I took 'Green Ladies,' and I found out where she lived—I found out things that helped me piece the puzzle together."

"Please piece the puzzle together," said the girl softly, and he thought, smilingly.

"I found out that she usually stayed at 'Green Ladies' when she had her holiday from hospital work, was, indeed, thought to be living there when all the time I was there. But since I was at 'Green Ladies' she must have gone elsewhere at once. And she had, to another house, a house quite close, and the name of this house was mentioned. And I knew it. I knew it well. And the mere mentioning of it gave the key to the whole riddle. For already—what do you think?—I had linked up that house with my shadow under the trees. That shadow of a shade I had seen on the first night, lived, I could swear, in that very house."

"Oh," breathed the girl, softly, gently.

"Yes, I had already fixed on that house as the



## GREEN LADIES

one house likely to harbor this—this elemental of the trees. And when the very house was named I saw the whole reason for everything blazingly, astonishingly clear. I saw, for instance, my landlord, coming down late at night, coming to 'Green Ladies' in a car—I had heard a car—coming unexpectedly as far as the Edens were concerned, and finding that I had her house, had practically stolen over her head.

"I saw her slipping out into the shelter of the pines to take a look, through the evening, at the strange, robber fellow as he lounged on the terrace. I saw her deciding that he was not too evil, and, in the kindness of her heart, making up her mind to leave him in possession. And then having given way to this charity perhaps telephoning, but anyhow, going off in her car to the other house, that other house which belonged to her and which was near.

"And then, having heard the full story from those most blessed of all secret diplomats, the Edens, she decided to take the law into her own hands, to telephone to lawyers, to issue commands. But, before she did that, I think she decided to have another look, a more ample look at the fellow who wanted her house; a good, sober daylight scrutiny. I think she decided on that."

## GREEN LADIES

With the tiniest laugh, with a laugh that had in it the faint, nervous traces of a giggle, the girl said,

"But then you weren't certain of that. In all this tissue of certainty, you aren't certain of that?"

"Well, no, I'm not certain. That sweet secret diplomat, Eve Eden, was too much for me. I had meant to take a walk before the lawyers came, and I don't know whether it was my walk, or her walk I took. I don't know whether she forced me to walk along the cliff by the power of active negation, or whether fate had already fixed the matter up. Anyhow, I am certain, well, I am nearly certain, she ran to the telephone, and called across that linking wire that I was coming along the cliff, and that a good look could be had of me.

"Well, I met my landlord. . . .

"She had her good look at me. She saw me, she talked to me. Even she let me strut and preen myself before her; let me talk largely of 'Green Ladies,' as if it were my 'Green Ladies,' as if I had lived there for a hundred years. She must have chuckled secretly at the figure of fun I was cutting, with my airs, with my omnipotences, with my telling her of my fixed possession of a house she had not yet let. She was charming! oh, please, she was gentleness itself. She didn't point

## GREEN LADIES

to my cap and bells. She didn't prick the bladder of my vainglory. She did not 'let on' for a blessed moment that I was just a little ridiculous. She was exquisitely kind."

"But, would you call it kindness or diplomacy? She couldn't 'let on' could she?" said the girl. "If she wanted to keep up the mystery, she had to play her part in the game. And, then, was the situation ridiculous? Wasn't it rather an attractive situation? Rather, don't you think, a jolly situation? One of those high comedy situations that give a zest to life? After all she probably enjoyed the savor of it."

"How nice of you to put it like that," he cried. "And no doubt she did enjoy the situation, she has that generous air, a witty and zestful air. And she handled the whole business so well. She played me neatly, and yet she was aimiability itself. And she confirmed herself in her opinion that I would do. She talked over the telephone to the lawyers when they came to 'Green Ladies,' and all was well. Although she remained in the background, benevolently anonymous always, until by the sheerest accident her identity was revealed, she did it all handsomely. I can't thank her enough. I could go on thanking her for a hundred years, and yet not thank her enough, not

## GREEN LADIES

warmly enough, not sufficiently, not in the least way adequately."

"But, do you think it is a matter for thanks?" said the girl rising to her feet. "After all she wanted to let 'Green Ladies' and she let it." And then, suddenly, she spoke with a deep thrill of feeling. "She may have had the best possible reason for ridding herself of 'Green Ladies.' She may have been as anxious as you that the transaction should be a swift one. She may have desired to sever herself from the place, to put it away from her once and for all."

She stood looking out to sea, a slim and at once a tragical figure.

"But, 'Green Ladies' and all its beauty?" was all the astonished Peter John could blurt out.

"Couldn't the very beauty of 'Green Ladies' be at the root of such a desire?" she said softly, staring out at the sea. "It is the beautiful things that hurt the most, the beautiful things that touch the memory so poignantly. Oh, the beauty is the pain of it."

And Peter John, feeling that he had been criminally clumsy, that he had blundered on to holy ground, could only stand and murmur, in the face of the sudden pitiable revelation,

"Oh, but I am truly sorry. I have been so stupid. . . ."

## GREEN LADIES

She stood there a slim, erect figure, so delicate, so tragic and so young; a figure poised and held by a vision of immeasurable grief. She stood there, firm and slim and youthful and erect, facing squarely the un conjecturable things of the night.

So for a moment she stood, and then she turned on him, and he could feel that the face that was lifted towards his in the vague mist of the moonlight was bravely smiling with a clear and unconquerable courage. Whatever her tragedy was she knew how to bear it with an indomitable spirit.

"How could you be stupid, you did not know. No, it was only—only she who was stupid. She tried to put life behind her, she tried to run away. And you cannot do that. You cannot run away. You must face life, accept it. She was stupid . . . and she isn't now. She has come back, and she is facing life."

And there was something in Peter's heart that seemed to swell and break, he wanted to weep for her; but more, he wanted to kneel in adoration before her courage.

"You make me humble," he cried. "For I have run away. I ran away from life to 'Green Ladies.' "

"You too?" she cried, using the words he had used, and he answered her in her words,

"Yes, we are both in the same gallery."



## GREEN LADIES

They were looking at each other, then, and at that they both laughed. They turned, and began to move, walking instinctively towards the house, towards the Dower House, the lights of which shone in a golden haze beyond the distant hedge.

They walked without speaking, but, it seemed to Peter John, ineffably close to each other, ineffably intimate, as though they were drawn together in a spiritual alliance, as though they had entered upon a brave confederacy to outface life. As though they had joined ranks to stand their ground and not run away.

She spoke once only before they reached the point where they would separate,

"You see," she said, and the smiling, the ironical, the whimsical note had come back to her voice, "you see, it is possible that your landlord did not remain anonymous from a generous motive. . . . You did imply that, didn't you?"

"Oh, there may have been some other motive mixed up in the business, but I still feel she wanted to let me down lightly. She did not want me to know that I had bundled her out from house and home, without even the proverbial moment's notice. I still think it was her gentle way of letting me get 'Green Ladies' without heartburnings and without friction."

"Put like that, it is at least generous."



## GREEN LADIES

"But, isn't there the barest possible shade of truth in it?" he insisted.

"Well. . . perhaps the barest possible shade," she agreed, smiling. And they were quiet again until they came to her footpath. And then—

"But about the telephone wire," she cried softly. "Even now we haven't learned how it turned your—your hamadryad into a landlord. How is that mystery explained?"

"It was almost daylight when I came along the cliff," said Peter John. "I came to look at the—well, the house in which the hamadryad lived. And on the top of the house was the telephone wire. The hamadryad was linked up with all the mystery."

"That seems irrefutable," said the girl.

"You think so, too?"

"I don't see how I can doubt it—good-night," she said, and she walked up the little footpath to her house. But two paces along the path she called,

"Good-night, tenant."

"Good-night, landlord," said Peter John.

And he walked home through a singing night.

## XXVII

**A**LL the same," mused Peter John for the benefit of Eden, "all the same a telephone wire does not explain everything, potent though it be . . . you agree, potent was the word she used?"

Eden set the fruit before Peter. Eden was now lord of a bevy of brisk, good-tempered Hampshire girls, as well as of flowers, but he himself served Peter, acting no doubt on the assumption that destiny would not be fulfilled otherwise. He set fruit before Peter and waited. He had learned in his wise old way that a pause of thirty seconds after any of Peter's remarks made life easier. Only by this means could he discover if his new master was conversing or merely reflecting aloud on things in general.

As Peter did not speak again, the old man recognized that this inconsequence was also a question. An inexplicable question, but one to demand some sound of the human voice in response. He said simply,

"Who, sir?"

## GREEN LADIES

"Who? But who else?" cried Peter in astonishment. "Who else but the lady who isn't Mrs. MacStinger as you wanted me to think?"

Eden, whom the mellow and lengthening years had taught the folly of attempting the impossible, placed the port in its Venetian decanter near to Peter's hand. He did not attempt the impossible. He said nothing at all.

"Or who isn't a hamadryad or a nereid either for that matter," added Peter reflectively. And Eden who recognized that while he might be a useful person to direct a conversation at, was not the best possible person to answer it, stood silent. He stood gazing across the oak of the dinner table, over the garden of spilled gems and across the grass slope to where the island stood up like a land of enchantment from a sea of polished steel. Steel that was flat and hot, for beneath the skin of the surface there showed iridescent flushes of crimson and blue and dull green and transient yellow.

The evening was muted down. All things seemed muffled by the veilings of the powdery haze. The slow, ardent sunset burnt with a dimmed and almost secret passion above the somber and unresponsive sea. The air stagnant and oppressive, yet seemed to hold something in leash

## GREEN LADIES

behind its stillness. Peter had said as much in the course of his dinner.

"There's a storm waiting," Eden had told him.

The old man had looked with concern at his friends the flowers, as though he hoped they were worldly-wise enough to know what was coming, and to have the sense to tuck themselves safely away; and he had glanced at the sunset as though to measure the mighty forces that he and his wise eyes alone could see marshaled in grim array. Peter had followed his glances.

"But, surely this is bad management, Eden?" he had said ruefully. "To have a storm running into to-morrow of all days, isn't that disastrous? Perhaps you've overlooked the fact that to-morrow is the day of St. Swithun."

"Storms come, sir," said Eden, "and they pass, always."

"Do they," scoffed Peter. "Not St. Swithun's anyhow. They keep it up for a preposterous number of days. But you know that St. Swithun was a Hampshire man, like you, so you can't be ignorant of him."

Eden turned a smiling face to Peter.

"Yes, sir, he was a Hampshire man and he was kind. It was because they wouldn't let him lie out under a Hampshire sky, under the Hampshire sun and with the rain beating on him in the way he had

## GREEN LADIES

known in life that he caused the angry rain to fall."

"Oh, is that the secret of the forty days?" asked Peter.

"Yes, they wanted to make a saint of him," said Eden. "They wanted to take his bones from under the common turf and put them in a noble grave in the great church over at Winchester. An' he didn't want it for he was a humble man. And so he sent the rain every day, until they left off trying to move him and let him rest where he wanted to be."

The old man smiled again at Peter.

"But we don't tell of the forty days' rain in Hampshire, sir. We say it is just St. Swithun baptizing the apples and we know it will soon be over. It'll be a quick storm, and the country will be sweet after it."

"New baptized and with a shining virtue," mused Peter.

"What will it be like then, for it is sweet now?"

He had fallen into a meditation on its sweetness. It's new sweetness since—when? Last night—?

Up to last night he had felt that there was a certain lack about all this radiant beauty. It had been unrestful. He had been discomposed, fretful, unsettled. He had felt the longing for a



## GREEN LADIES

forbidden life. The tropic south had pulled on his heart strings, and he had wanted with an intolerable pain the things that had seemed to him his life's work to do. He who had come to settle down, had not settled down.

But since last night the country had been more comely, more serene. And now he made no pretense of ignoring the reason. This wood-sprite, this landlord, this Phillippa had made the deuce of a difference.

No disguising that; no use protesting he had no right to entangle himself in such schemes of companionship and beauty; it had happened. He had talked with her. He had heard from her own lips, in her own voice—that cool, soft and young, that so tender yet so bright and courageous a voice—that she was to remain in the country. That she was not going away again, that he would see her more (for that is what it implied to him) and talk with her. And,

“Yes, the background did need its central figure,” he mused. “Man cannot live without neighbors. There may be sermons in trees, but there is very little exchange of satisfying conversation. And one does want an essential, not any but an essential companion.”

He thought of the slimness and the grace of the girl, the spring of her carriage; the delicacy



## GREEN LADIES

and fragility of her bearing; her wittiness and vividness, and yet the high seriousness and sensitiveness of her manner.

And he thought of her face, quick and vital, with the dainty and precise features; the shine of her bright and yet enigmatical eyes; the warm, and beautiful lips, softly curved, alluring, delicately mocking and lovely and grave. And the sumptuous massing of her hair that seemed to throw an elfin shadow across the ardent vitality glowing in her face, a shadow that gave a touch of spirit, the fairy, of intangible other-world mystery to her radiant charm, so that one truly felt that she was a thing of another plane, a wood-spirit indeed, a creature compounded of gossamer and mystery.

And as he thought of her he gave a half groan of misery and pleasure:

"You are thinking too much of the girl, and you musn't, Peter John. You are on the verge of the deeps of love, just the veriest push of fate. . . . Steady yourself, Peter John. . . ."

And he did not steady himself. He went on thinking. He knew within his heart that he must go on thinking. There was nothing else half so worth while.

And then, as he thought, he had come to that telephone wire. He went over it all again, ex-

## GREEN LADIES

plaining all of the apparently inexplicable things. He had even made a reason for her stay at the Dower House; for instance, her going there at so late an hour of the night. This Mrs. Patricot, he decided, was an old and amiable friend, a widow with a roomy house and a heart to match; she had willingly taken the girl in. That was easy to explain, but, as he had said to Eden, there were things less easy.

"Why, for instance, couldn't a person bear a certain place—as Miss Gabrielle had it?" he asked. "What would be the best possible reason for any one ridding oneself of a place, as she herself had it? Why should one fly from beauty, Eden?"

Peter was speaking diplomatically, naming no names. He had learnt by now that the wise and simple old man was a very prince of dumbness on certain matters—on one certain matter.

"Can you," he insisted, "can you conceive any one running away from a place that was beautiful and attractive in every way?"

"It might be perhaps, too beautiful" said Eden, and Peter stared at him in astonishment.

"Is it a conspiracy," he cried in wonderment, "or are you a magician that you should speak in the tongue of—well, hamadryads and landlords?"

"It's how it seems to me, sir," said the old man,

## GREEN LADIES

as usual catching the sense rather than the significance of Peter's question. "If you love a place, if you had been happy in it, so it seems to me, you might turn against it when sorrow came. Because you loved it so it would hurt you. As you went about a place like that you'd be reminded everywhere of how happy you had been, and you couldn't bear it, sir."

"Even in a place like this?"

"More than anywhere, I think, sir," said the old man gently, looking wistfully at the serene comeliness of the house. "If one grew up in a place like this, knew it as a place where one had always been happy, and expected it to be the place where one always would be happy—then, if something happened, sir. Something that was cruel happened here, then being here would always remind you of the happiness that might have been and the cruelty that spoiled it so. Everything here would bring it back to you."

He looked at Peter in his shy hesitating way, as though he wished to say much, and yet dare say only a little.

"You couldn't bear a place like this if you loved it a lot, an' it was here your heart was broken. You couldn't bear it, sir, pretty as it is, could you?"

"I see what you mean," said Peter.

## GREEN LADIES

Eden stood looking over the sea, his old face, the face of a gentle Cæsar, soft with memories, a wondrous pity on his fine old lips.

Peter nodded assent.

"Yes, the greatest pangs of hell are those that we endure amid the scenes we loved," he said. "The doctors tell us that, and the doctors are wise."

They were silent for a spell, looking out at the slow fires of the sunset, then,

"Even in 'Green Ladies' might there be a season for such unhappiness?" Peter asked softly.

The old man looked away from the sky, looked down at Peter, and his eyes were kind and sad.

"There was, sir," he said.

He lifted the butler's tray with the remnants of the meal upon it. He said no more. He walked across the gravel of the terrace into the house.

His going was deliberate, Peter knew. He would say no more, and Peter dare not press him. But at his going Peter had again that gray and intolerable emotion of sadness he had encountered on his first night.

He glanced around at the fairness of the house, and he understood. This place made for happiness of man, how crushing it would be if its beauty

## GREEN LADIES

were but to house a world of bitter thoughts of what might have been.

To Phillippa it wasn't the scene of happiness but a setting for tragedy. What that tragedy was he did not know, but he could feel with her. He could understand how it might be that the very gold of the sunlight on the house and the garden might be the light of mockery.



## XXVIII

**A**ND again that night he dreamed of the little wood of pines, and the dim shape that dwelt in that wood.

He had gone boldly in the delicate azure of the night into the darkness of the trees. The shape had beckoned him, a voice cool, soft, tender, yet shining and courageous had called to him, and he had pushed among the trees, scornful of their malignant shadows; ignoring the clutching hands of their gloomy branches; facing magnificently the golden-burning light that shone afar off between the pillars of the trees.

He had pushed into the darkness under the branches with a sense of invulnerable buoyancy, for he and this slim sweet spirit of the trees had made their firm alliance against the tenebrous forces of the night. They were linked in indomitable intimacy, and were joining their hands to out-face life. He pushed on amid the evil blackness of the woods and presently he was close to this slim, elemental thing; moving with her towards the shining beacon of their hopes.

## GREEN LADIES

She moved beside him with her faint and lovely grace, and her hand, soft and delicate and strong, had sought and held his in their bond of courage. He could feel the clear power of her spirit in the cool, sure grasp of her fingers. He knew that a thrill of communion had passed from one to the other, and that, hand in hand like this, they could go on and defy the principality of darkness.

They moved through the wood with their high courage, evading the greedy and prehensible hands of gloom. And as they went they knew that the glorious and shining land of promise was nearer. They could see the majesty of its light, and hear the superb and inspiring note of its great waters and its great wind.

And he knew with the decisive knowledge of his soul, that this was why he was here, why he had come to this house. He and this girl were to find their way to happiness helping each other. The glory and the splendor of life was beating in on them through the tree trunks. He could see it shining on her face, on her mobile and sensitive face, see it glowing in her eyes and lighting up the quick, warm, splendid promise of her lips.

And he called out to this heart-beautiful girl of mystery and mist,

"See, we are nearly there. Together, with our

## GREEN LADIES

hands and our spirits linked like this, we are to win through."

She had turned to him, and the splendor of her eyes had filled him with fire. She had smiled and held his hand tighter; they knew it was ordained they were to triumph together.

And then they were in the valley of the pit.

Yes, suddenly they were down in the deeps of darkness, and the glory of the promised land had gone from them. About them was the massive night, tangible and crushing. Close to them was the massive array of evil, marching down on them, beating down on them, plucking at them, trying to tear them apart with ugly and greedy hands.

And the sound of the great waters and the great wind had gone, as the fine and shining light had gone. In their place was the tumult of despair. A horror of darkness was about them and it was full of sound. Worlds fell in deep and awful crashes. Noise piled up, heaped up and horrified rushed down on them . . . they were being ground to earth by great blows of sound. They cowered together under this mighty assault of the night. Their hands clung tight, but their spirit winced beneath the awful shocks of evil. Despair and pain and terror were loosed on them in destroying uproars. They bowed beneath the terrible strokes of the darkness. They could hear

## GREEN LADIES

the sweeping movement of an enormous wind, as the forces of wickedness charged down on them from the illimitable regions of space.

They were deep in the pit of pain, and helpless. And then with a huge blaze of white and wicked light, and a huge thunder of feet, the vile hosts bore down on them. And in that blaze of light, he saw the girl on her knees, bowed and on her knees, and her arm across her eyes . . . . He saw her there beaten by the dark forces of life, with only his hand between her and annihilation. Only his hand . . . and as the light flickered and vanished in the blackness he tightened his grasp on her warm, weak finger, and he called aloud in defiance of the night,

"I have her tight. I will not let her go. You shall not beat her down."

And then he opened his eyes to the waking world.

The lightning played again across the broad windows of his room, and thunder broke the heavens with a rending crash of worlds cleft asunder.

"The storm," he whispered, "Eden's storm."

He lay until the lightning played again, then he got out of bed.

He did not know why. He did not even then quite realize he had been swept from the kingdom

## GREEN LADIES

of dreams to the world of reality. He rose and with the movement of his dream he stepped to the window.

The lightning blazed again.

Down in his garden, down where the iron rail divided the paddock from the little formal garden of flowers, he saw the girl.

Unmistakably she was there. In the intense world-wide blaze of light, he saw her against the iron railings. And she was on her knees, bowed on her knees against the rails, and her arm was across her eyes.

She was there slim and young and pitiable, kneeling in agony. And he knew that as she crouched there, one arm on the rail, one arm stretched along it, that she had been beaten down by the dark forces of the night, that she was crushed down by the awful powers of despair.

And as the pale light blazed again, he stretched out his hand as though to catch the hand that lay along the thin iron rail. And as the thunder broke in awful clamor, he called aloud in defiance of the night,

"I have her tight. I will not let her go. You shall not beat her down."

And even as he spoke he seemed to feel within his hand the flutter of her soft fingers. It was unmistakable. He could feel as though he really



## GREEN LADIES

held her tight, the responsive, the appealing, the hopeful tightening of that weakening clasp.

It was real, he could swear it was actual. . . . He experienced a definite sensation of holding her, he definitely felt the narrow softness of her fingers, and the strengthening pressure of her palm.

And the lightning blazed again, and she was standing up, staring towards the house, gazing towards the house in an attitude shrinking and startled and yet uplifted. As though she, too, had felt the clasp of his hand, the strength of his purpose.

And then the world was black again, but Peter, turning away from the window, called once more in defiance of the night,

"I have her tight. I will not let her go. You shall not beat her down."

And as he called he laughed aloud. He felt that he would win, would beat the powers of darkness and of evil. That was what he was here to do. He had been sent to "Green Ladies" for that purpose alone. He knew it, with the decisive knowledge of one who has experienced a revelation. He sank into a chair, and buried his face in his hands, and did not look from the window any more.

## XXIX

**H**E woke to the day clear-eyed and exultant.

He had spent half the night without sleep; he had had a strange and disturbing experience. For a brief and terrible moment he had stepped beyond the border line of the known, had passed the frontiers of the flesh into that dread, intangible plane of mystical happenings. He had touched hands with the mysteries. And despite this he woke with a high and clarified spirit. Both body and soul were worlds above fatigue. The universe seemed not dark but good.

He remained with waking eyes, asking himself if that which he had gone through had been merely a dream. Had it been reality or merely illusion? And he answered with conviction,

“No, it happened. It really did happen.”

It really had happened. The girl had been down by the fence, really in the flesh and not in the spirit. She had come there in one of the inexplicable moods of sorrow. The house where she had known tragedy had drawn her. She had

## GREEN LADIES

walked to it from her cottage, and there, facing it, had succumbed to despair and had sunk down by the rails. He really had seen her. And, as he had stretched out his hand to her, he had really touched her hand.

He had really touched her hand, he had felt her hand in his. It had happened. Though there was no means of explaining how it had happened, by what strange and mystical means that impossible thing had come about, yet he had no doubt about it. Strange, mystical, preternatural though it might be, he knew that that handclasp had taken place.

And as he thought he said,

"It happened for a reason. It was to show me what I am to do. I am to help her." He felt a settled and quiet happiness at this. For a moment he saw the girl before him, slim, swaying, and lovely, and he knew that in some way that would be shown to him presently he was to help her. He was to take her by the hand, lift her up and bring her safely through the dangers of the darkness. All this, he considered, was unmistakable.

What the evils of darkness meant for her, he did not know. Why "Green Ladies" with its beauty should be the reason for so acute a grief, he did not know. Why there should be tragedy in the life of one so young, what he was to do, how

## GREEN LADIES

he was to do it, he did not know, he did not care.

"It doesn't matter," he thought. "I am to save her from the despair of the pit. Why and how—perhaps that will be told me in time, it matters little. I am to do it."

Not a vestige of the blackness of the night was upon him. He rose with a serene, uplifting purpose. He went to the window and looked out, and smiled.

"After the storm the triumph of the sun; even nature breaks into adage and gives me an omen." He drank in the brightness of the sun-washed earth. "Hampshire and Eden are right. St. Swithun has baptized not only the apples but everything. The earth is born anew. New virtue shines from it."

Indeed the world has had a new-born, new-washed air after the rain of the night. The green and the gold, the blue and the white of the day shone with a pellucid radiance. All the colors of the morning were limpid and crystalline. Even the sunlight seemed distilled.

On his way to the sea he stopped by the thin iron rail.

"She was here," he reflected. He looked towards the house. "She could not have seen me within my window."

## GREEN LADIES

Even now he recalled her startled standing attitude.

"Yet she knew. She felt my hand in hers as I felt hers in mine. She knew."

He thrilled at the thought. He was sure she had shared with him that strange moment in the tremendous passage of the night.

As he towed himself, with a keen sense of the virility of all the world surging within him, he stopped and lifted his face to the radiant sky,

"But it is not a tragic universe; it is a glad universe," he cried. "There is a sun and I am to teach you so you may not say, 'There is no sun.' "

He stood quiet, recalling her attitude as she had uttered that phrase at their first meeting. He saw the shadow of sorrow that had clouded her face. He saw again the small, wistful drooping of her lips, the sore, tragic line of her erect body.

"Oh, but you're so young and so lovely. One can't even begin imagining that you have known sorrow. You aren't built for tears, but for smiles." And after a moment, "How old are you, I wonder, twenty-five, twenty-seven? Yes, I suppose I can give her nine or eight years. Nine years—is that too great a breach?"

Then as a memory of his own despondency of



## GREEN LADIES

—was it only a day ago?—passed across his mind, he murmured half defiantly,

“Yes, I am in love with her. I own up. In spite of malaria and broken ambitions, and one’s weighty decisions to live and die a hermit, I am in love with her. I am even in love with being in love with her. And I can’t help myself, and I don’t want to help myself. And even if I did, the thing has been taken out of my hands of my will—if it was ever in the hands of my will.”

In his exultation he felt that the action of a power outside himself was undeniable. Something had happened to him. He had been given a vision for a definite purpose. In his present mood he questioned nothing. He felt that to do so would be to quarrel with an Act of Providence. And then, maybe, the human side in him was also on the side of Providence. It so often is. Why quarrel with something very much to one’s taste? This girl Phillippa was so remarkably adorable, it was easy to surrender to what seemed the force of circumstances. He willingly surrendered.

Even in that hiatus of human existence, when the gloomy forces within man have undisputed sway, that is, in the moment when one is ready for breakfast, and breakfast had not yet arrived, Peter’s serenity was undiminished. He stared at

## GREEN LADIES

the bright, waving banners of joy, that people without vision insisted were only the leaves of the trees, and he told himself,

"She is looking at a view very much like this. I wonder how she is feeling? I wonder what she is thinking?"

When he sat down he said half aloud,

"Well, fate has taken control of events. Something big has happened to both of us. The little ideas of yesterday have gone. How does she take it? I am another person." He said to Eden, "I think your St. Swithun must have baptized me as well last night. I have a new virtue. Don't you find an enormous change in me?"

Eden slipped a dish in place.

"Not changed, sir, but happier."

"Oh, but isn't that the devil of a change? Don't you find my early morning smiles different from my habitual scowling gloom?"

"You smiled before, sir," said Eden gently.

"And wasn't that happiness? Isn't smiling the outward sign of joy?"

"Not all smiles are happy, sir?" said Eden.

"Oh," breathed Peter, taken aback, even though he was by now used to the penetration of this wise and simple old man. "Oh, and my heart wasn't in it. But now you think my heart is

## GREEN LADIES

taking its share in the business of smiles. Well, but wouldn't you call that a change?"

"No, sir," said Eden. He stood upright, and as usual he looked out at his friends the green and growing things, as though they were his councilors always at difficult moments. "It's not a change, any more than a bud changes when it becomes a rose. . . . It's merely becoming complete."

Peter John stared at Eden with something of wonder in his heart.

"And I'm merely becoming complete. Who gives you wisdom, Eden? I believe you are right, I believe, after all, I am beginning to see what I am to do. I am beginning to see a meaning in things; and that, after all, is the way to become complete."

And, after a moment,

"You wouldn't call such a change—well, if you like—such a process of completion, an act of fate, Eden?"

Eden removed a plate.

"I don't know overmuch about fate, sir, but it seems to me, it's only our word for things that have happened to us," he said softly.

"Where did you get your wisdom?" Peter wondered, as the wise old man went out.

### XXX

**T**HE things that were to happen to Peter happened at once. Now that events were marching they went forward without pause and without break. It was as though Dame Fate, having set his feet to his predestined path, was breaking him of his habit of straying.

He rather wanted to stray, to have a breathing space. He had even decided he would take a breathing space. He did not want to see Phillippa yet; presently, when he had got his wits into key, he would see her; but not now. He made up his merely human mind—as if there was not such a thing as fate, and a woman at that—to project himself into a long, stiff walk. In that long, stiff walk he would think things out. He would be wise and circumspect, would classify facts neatly and range them into order. He would get at the heart of this wonder, examine it and evolve a wise course of action.

No, he did not want to meet Phillippa yet; he must think first.

Man likes to manage life like this, but fate is a woman.

## GREEN LADIES

Fate cannot be bothered with human meticulousness, perhaps she has too many destinies to manage. Certainly her business methods are not man's. She has no human order in her doings. She merely picks man up and hurls him from encounter to encounter, spins him from crisis to crisis. She wastes no time.

Peter John decided that he was going for a sober, cogitative walk. Fate flung him among the tea cups of "Milton Little."

It was easily manipulated. Fate strewed Tristram Waymsley, that extraordinarily strewable young man, across Peter's path. Tristram tempted Peter with tea, and Peter succumbed. The first person who shook Peter's hand in Mrs. Waymsley's drawing-room was the girl, Phillippa.

It happened with a sort of detonative unexpectedness. "Detonative" is the only word. Peter had not the vaguest hint of an idea that he might meet her, and she had turned round suddenly; and in, well, yes, it was the only word, an explosion of astonishment they were looking into each other's startled eyes.

That explosion, that shock of meeting, seemed to have made about them a great vacuum. Alone, standing in that inhumanly empty space, they hung without breath, without faculty of movement, staring at each other; their hands touching.



## GREEN LADIES

What his eyes said to hers he did not know. But he saw in her eyes surprise, and more than surprise, a look of flight, a look of alarm. She gazed with a wide glance, transfixed, hypnotized, by the shock of the sight of him, for—how long was it, a score of centuries? Only after tremendous cycles of time did the blood, which had drained away from her cheeks, come back again, with a delicate, quickening flow. And she drew away a little, and her eyes dropped. Yes, the eyes which gazed so steadily and candidly out at the world, dropped, and the rose on her cheek deepened.

For how long was it, a score of centuries, that they stood thus in the communion of isolation; under the shock of their recognition of each other as companions of the darkness and the storm? A score of centuries it seemed indeed before she drew away.

Her hand moved in his. The soft, warm, familiar flutter of her fingers moved under his. They were slipping from him. And instantly, instinctively, he seemed plunged back into that moment of blackness and rain and thunder; for an instant he felt about him the menace of the evil and ominous things. Instinctively his clasp tightened. He held her tight. It was then she lifted her lashes and looked at him, a quick glance

## GREEN LADIES

of fear, wonder and interrogation. Her pitiable frightened glance gave him a "You! You know? You had that experience too?" He could see the soft tumult of her breast, her lips formed a breathless "Oh."

A score of centuries was it, or an instant, before he released her; before she stepped back with a slight stiffening that was not reserve, but rather reticence and fear. Even that gesture Peter knew. It was the shadow of her attitude of the night. So she had stood and looked up at his window after that strange spiritual handclasp of the storm.

Then it was all over, she was standing back, and he was shaking the hand of the other girl, the ecstatic Gabrielle. Gabrielle who was as ecstatic as all the litanies of the world, and far too uplifted to notice a cataclysm happening under her tilted nose.

It had taken, not a score of centuries after all; only moments. That immense crisis, that tremendous reunion, that breathless recognition had occupied only seconds. Even now the gay and brisk grandmother had not completed her gracious gesture of greeting and general introduction; a gesture part teapot, part hand that held it. It had taken only that brief feckless space of time, the wave of a friendly teapot—and yet all that had happened in that space.

## GREEN LADIES

In just another moment they were sitting, and all were chatting and smiling and talking delightful nonsense as if nothing had happened, as if two mighty spiritual forces, souls, had not come together in immense impact.

"But of course," reflected Peter, looking across at Phillippa, chatting against the superlatives of Gabrielle, but looking, yes, looking pale, "but of course they don't know. Only she and I know. Only she and I shared that experience."

And as he thought this Phillippa looked across at him; it was a quick fluttering look of fear and wonderment and bewildered questioning.

There was no doubt she knew, and that now she recognized that her knowledge was shared by him.

### XXXI

**P**OSSIBLY the walk home in the evening with Phillippa was not a decree of fate. It was perhaps merely an accident of politeness, though it might have been an act of Mrs. Waymsley.

After all, what else could they do? Social Euclid foreordained that walk. If two persons are to return home in the same direction and at much the same hour, it is merely mathematics that they go together. Mrs. Waymsley, and maybe her eyes twinkled, had drawn attention to the arithmetical fact.

So they walked home together in the quiet end of the day and through the gentle lanes, and they spoke that little that is not enough.

They began by speaking a good deal. They began by pretending they were perfectly capable of carrying on the spontaneous combustion of lively talk that made the home of the grandmother a spritely and bustling place. But the combustion was not spontaneous. Soon it was not even combustion.

## GREEN LADIES

The dancing flames of talk flickered lower and lower as they went along, and at length died altogether, and they walked side by side in the leafy Hampshire lanes still humid from the storm, still dewed with the holy water of St. Swithun's baptism, in silence. And not in an ordinary silence, but in a silence that tingled with unsaid things. Silence did not quell the exultance that had been his all day; it merely curbed and fretted his breasting spirit.

They walked on thinking their own thoughts, which were undoubtedly exactly the same thoughts, and they could say nothing. They shared the immensities and they could not exchange opinions on them.

"And we ought to be talking," Peter told the delicate cameo of her profile. He cried it with the utmost protest, but in a voice that only his heart could hear. "We ought to be speaking of the whole of this mystical, mysterious business. We ought to join hands as we joined hands before, and we ought to be telling each other what it means. Why I am to help you. What we must do, what we must attain to work out the destiny so obviously set us last night. It ought to be supremely simple. It ought to be as natural and as simple as saying 'How d'y do!' And it's impossible."



## GREEN LADIES

He stole glances at her as she moved beside him. How well she carried herself; how pretty she was moving forward like that with a slim, erect, irresistible fluency.

He noted her face, the vague troubled wonderment of her air. He could detect the sense of discomposure, of trepidation not in the least hidden by her chin-high pose of serenity. He noted her pallor, and read in her features the stress of the night. And that goaded him. Was he not there to alter all that?

"You're thinking of it," he cried aloud in the silence of his soul. "Of course you're thinking of what happened in the night. How can you think of anything else? How can I? How can we be anything else but absorbed by it? How can we, for a moment, keep silent about it? But we do. We don't speak. We daren't speak."

They walked on. Now and then they did play up to the conventions. They did pretend with a show of coolness to make a slight to-do about things that did not matter. She, for instance, called his attention to a riot of flowers.

"Look," she said with her air of whimsical, ironic and smiling friendliness driven ("literally whipped," scowled Peter), to the surface of her lips and eyes. "Look, did you ever see such a

## GREEN LADIES

splashing about of herb-trinity? Only . . . only, perhaps you don't call it herb-trinity?"

"I call it, as a matter of fact," said Peter with his whimsical, quizzical air driven—and no doubt literally whipped—to the surface of his lips and eyes, "I call it heart's-ease; or, if you like, three-faces-under-a-hood or even kit-run-about."

"Oh," she breathed, "oh, and not," and perhaps the effort was not so difficult now—"and not pansy?"

"Not now. Not in public. If Eden is part of my public, never pansy."

"But when Eden is about, you call it all that?" her air had a genuine note of artificial speculation; she carried it off. Her laughing, whimsical pose said, "I only ask you this as a matter of information; not as a matter of teasing."

He answered in her own manner,

"Not at all. When Eden is about I call it just love in—idleness."

"The best name of all," she laughed. "Eden taught you that?"

"Yes. He quoted Shakespeare to prove he was correct." She opened her eyes in wonderment. "It's quite true. He stood looking down at the flowers, as though they were to listen too, and said very softly, but you know his way,

## GREEN LADIES

'Yet marked I, where the bolt of Cupid fell,  
It fell upon a little western flower,  
Before milk-white, now purpled with love's wound,  
And maidens call it "Love-in-idleness."'

He said that, and smiled at me, yes, and at the flowers, and gave me all the other names off-hand. He was generous. No need to restrict me to one because it was his favorite."

"But—but——" wondered Phillippa. "Eden and Shakespeare . . . where is that from; I forget?"

"I asked the same question. Eden didn't know."

"But, surely, if he quoted . . ." the astonishment was soft, laughing, genuine.

"No, Eden has his own method. He doesn't read Shakespeare for drama. He reads him for flowers. He goes through Shakespeare from end to end, picking out the flowers. He never notices the plays. As a matter of fact it's from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.'"

"I shall look it up. It's quite wonderful and queer."

"I did look it up. And isn't Eden always wonderful and queer? He has plundered all the blossoms out of the classics. Did you know Spenser said the fairest things about the fragrant eglantine? You didn't. All you know, all I know,

## GREEN LADIES

to the good of Spenser is 'The Faërie Queene.' Eden didn't see 'The Faërie Queene' for the flowers in it."

They talked of Eden. They talked of Eden more than Eden warranted. They drew out Eden as a subject. They stretched him lamentably thin. But even Eden was not eternal. In a short time they were again walking without words.

They walked stoically, thinking. Peter groaned in spirit.

"Of all the folly; of all the crass, conventional stony-visioned folly, the folly of human beings is the crassest. We walk here side by side, touching each other, almost. We walk alone, we share the same perplexities, the same thoughts—and it is as though a wall of illimitable length and a million miles high stood between us. We talk of Eden. We talk of a thousand million things that do not matter. We cannot talk of the one, supreme, tremendous doing that matters."

And after a score of strides,

"Eden wonderful and queer indeed. What could be more wonderfully queer than the baffling enigma of human companionship? We can join hands in a myriad encounters, and in a thousand ways can get in touch, but we can never penetrate. Always this imponderable curtain is about

## GREEN LADIES

us; we romp outside the curtain with our fellows and they never come inside. We have sight and tongue and hearing and telegraphy and telephony and the marvel of the wireless waves—but we have nothing that will enable soul to speak to soul. We are unfathomable mysteries to each other.”

And forty paces on he cried to his heart:

“It’s unendurable. I wish I dare speak. I wish I dare ask her how I can begin to help.”

But he could not speak. He dare not, and a little way on they walked into the distraction of the sun.

The neat Hampshire lane bent and went down hill, and facing them they saw the sea and the sun.

They stood and gazed entranced downhill, where the land appeared to fling wide its arms in absolute surrender to the sun, where smooth grass swept in a stupendous line to the marvelous mobility of the sea, where sea swept to the limits of the world in a shining, heaving, flashing, glowing floor of sun flame. They gazed, and Peter, the spirit within him swelling up until it was ready to burst its way beyond endurable limits, cried out,

“Isn’t it entirely gorgeous? It’s Intipampa, the Field of the Sun, as I live. The veritable



## GREEN LADIES

Field of the Sun, nothing else, nothing less. Isn't it . . . isn't it leagues beyond the range of any spoken language? Could one say what one felt about that in anything less than music?"

The girl Phillippa gazed down at the splendor of the sun. She did not speak. As Peter had said, it was a veritable field of the sun. The grass went down to the sea without a tree upon its surface, though it was enclosed by walls of trees, the broad, gently palpitating sea continued the flat surface of the grass. Poised above the horizon, the sun, a molten flame, poured itself out on this huge field.

"Isn't it even beyond music?" Phillippa asked. "I should imagine that even the musicians would despair of getting that into their songs."

Her soft, quick lips were a little parted at the sheer wonder of the sight. The pallor which had marked her face was transfigured into radiance by the golden light beating upon her.

She looked, Peter reflected, as though she herself were one with the sun; a saint of the sun; a natural part of it; absorbed by it; throwing out its very light with a noble and clear spirituality. Peter considered the view.

"It's miraculous," he murmured in delight. "It's breathless. It's a pageant of the glory of the sun. All the sun is poured into it, concen-

## GREEN LADIES

trated upon it. It's heaped up and brimming over with the sun. We are regarding the wonder of the ancients, Intipampa."

He said this aloud, but he also wanted to cry aloud,

"That is what lies beyond the trees. That is what we are to reach, you and I. That is the meaning of our meeting last night."

Perhaps his eyes conveyed this message too ardently. For she looked up and her glance was caught in his, and hung there embarrassed. And under the golden sheen of the sun the gentle glow of her blood mounted up in her throat and cheek.

She turned quickly to the field of sunlight. Turned hurriedly, she was summoning her reserves. She nodded at it, as though bowing it a gentle thanks for the pleasure it gave her. She walked on.

She walked without speaking for a full minute, then, with a very fair attempt ("colossal feminine bluff," scoffed Peter) at her old, bright, smiling, suggestively ironic attitude,

"It's probably merely refraction after all," she told him. "The scientists would soon shatter your theories. They would reduce your wonder of the ancients to its native elements. An overplus of the water in the air, a clear sky and a bright sun. That is all it is—to the scientists."

## GREEN LADIES

"Only, we aren't scientists, not creatures who see only chemical experiments in the wonders of the earth," said Peter. "We are common people who just see glory in the sky."

She smiled, she smiled partly at his retort, partly at having steered away from danger.

"What is Intipampa?" she asked.

"Just what that is," said Peter, deliberately holding back information to punish the duplicity of her smile. "It means the Field of the Sun."

"Why does it mean it and to whom does it mean it? What is the story behind it?"

"I shall have to mount my hobby?"

"But hobbies are meant to be mounted."

"It is Intipampa, just the Field of the Sun. The real Intipampa was in Peru, at Cuzo. Not a flat field like that, I am afraid, for I tricked my symbol to fit my view; but a great garden. It was a great garden of gold, standing beneath a great temple of gold. Standing over it, towering above it on a hill, was the Town of Gold, the Coricancha. Truly of gold, you know, a vast temple of the Sun god, covered over the whole surface of its walls with plates of polished gold. And this garden of gold stretched away beneath it. And that was truly gold, too. All the flowers were of shining gold; all the shrubs and the trees were gold, even the insects and the birds, and

## GREEN LADIES

the animals, so they tell, were of gold. And the tools, too, the spades and rakes and hoes, and trowels, they were gold. All things were of gold in that golden garden which stood beneath the Town of Gold. And beating down upon it was the gold of the sun, whom the ancient people of the Incas worshipped. Can't you see the flash and shine of that garden? Can't you see the tremble of light that swept among the golden trees as the leaves moved in the sun? They adored with a large gesture in those days and in those lands."

They walked on quietly.

"They don't mention that among the wonders of the world," she said. "It was a wonder of the world for all that. Oh, it must have been worth seeing. . . . They tell me," she obviously indicated the Waymsleys, "you are not going back to South America."

"I am not going back," said Peter, and, suddenly, he felt he had his chance. "I can't, you know. It is forbidden."

"Oh," she said, and her sympathy was very real. "I'm truly sorry."

"There was a time when I was truly sorry, too," said Peter deliberately. "I am not sorry to-day."

## GREEN LADIES

He looked at her, their eyes caught, he thought her breath caught, too.

"Malaria forbids," said Peter, not helping her out but deliberately leading her into the way he wanted her to go.

"Oh, South America gave you malaria?"

"It did," answered Peter, now finding the turn of the talk very much to his purpose. "But South America wasn't the reason. South America merely introduced the malaria. It was the beginning of a habit in malaria."

"Yes, I remember," she said gently. "They told me you had it again in the Dardanelles, and then in Palestine. But if you had had it in South America, how came you to run the risk of the East?"

"I wasn't actually consulted. In fact, I am inclined to think that my having had malaria in South America was a direct inducement to the powers that be to send me East; on the principle, you see, that if I got it I wouldn't be meeting the unexpected. And they probably transferred me to Palestine for the same good but inexplicable reason. 'This man,' I can hear them say, 'knows all about malaria. We will send him where he can make full use of his knowledge.'"

"You can make a joke of it?"



## GREEN LADIES

"I can to-day," said Peter, and he looked at her, and she glanced away and said quickly,

"But they sent you to France in the end, didn't they?" she said quietly.

"Yes, in the spring of 1918. But there I was rather an irritant. You see, their wisdom had had its wise side. In the East they were accustomed to malaria. In the west, they were not so accustomed, and I had the habit by then. When other men felt chilly, I caught fever, and that worried the doctors. I was a thorn in their flesh. And then I got a ridiculous wound, an absurd scratch in the advance towards Cambrai, and that trivial thing became a storm center and I had the fever again. That was too much for them; they ridded themselves of me once and for all."

They were near the gate of the Dower House now.

"I have had malaria cases," she told him. "I have been working in a hospital during the war. And you—you can live down malaria."

"The doctors told me that, too. I had only to follow their ruling and I would remain, with occasional slight lapses, to all intents and purposes an ordinary, fairly healthy citizen of the British Isles. But that was the basis of their ruling, I must remain a citizen of the British Isles."

"And not go to South America?"

## GREEN LADIES

"They are fatalistic concerning South America."

"It is a tragedy," she said to him standing at her gate, her face aglow with sympathy. "I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"It is not a tragedy," he told her, looking at her boldly. "I thought it was a tragedy. I played at it being a tragedy. I pretended that my life was shattered, that without South America there was nothing left for me but to bury myself away. To go out of life and hide myself away from the haunts and habits and companionships and the eyes of men. I played on that. I stamped in gloomy zeal across my narrow little stage. But now I am inclined to think it wasn't tragedy at all. I think, almost with certainty, that that which I thought was malice was merely opportunity. We are inclined to grumble at Fate, but sometimes the very acts we think hardest are merely means to an end. Fate, as I see it now, denied me my work in South America because it had something for me to do in Hampshire. I railed against Fate because I didn't understand her workings. But last night I was made to understand."

He said this deliberately, facing her as she looked at him. Her eyes had not left his face, and the look of perplexity and fear was still in

## GREEN LADIES

her glance. Her lips were parted and under the stress of her emotions she found it difficult to speak.

But she made a great effort.

"How did you learn that?" she began, and stopped, and began anew, "what did you learn . . . ?" and stopped again.

"I learnt that a life that seemed to be useless could yet be useful to some one else. I found out that I could help, and, I think, was sent here to help some one who sorely needed such aid."

Still she stood and looked at him, frightened and incapable of adequate expression, even her eyes seemed to appeal to him for silence, as though she feared to touch on things to which this talk must lead. She trembled slightly, and she did not speak.

"I learnt all this last night during the storm," Peter insisted, and the soft flutter of a frightened breath came from her lips.

"What could you have learnt?" she breathed.

"I think you know what I learnt," he answered.

"Last night in the storm, I looked from my window."

"You saw me," she cried in distress. "I didn't know."

"I saw you . . . but is that the thing that mat-

## GREEN LADIES

ters? Something else happened which matters more. Do you remember?"

Again there was that fluttering and fearful breath, but after an instant she nodded her head a little, to show that she understood to what he referred.

"I took your hand," said Peter slowly. "You remember that, and I promised I would hold it until I had taken you away from all the things that make your life so tragic."

And Peter, as he said that, took her hand, so cold and small and weak, as though it were lifeless. He lifted it to his lips, and for a moment it lay against the warmth of his mouth.

Then he let it go, and stood erect, facing her.

She stood pale and frail and slight, her eyes bright with pain and fear. She stood thus for a moment, and then she opened her lips as though to speak, but failed to utter a sound. It was only with an effort she presently said,

"It's too big. I can't understand it."

At the sound of her voice she seemed to awake to the realities of the moment. She said to Peter quickly,

"It was a dream."

"You held my hand," Peter told her.

She looked at him,

## GREEN LADIES

"Yes, I held your hand. I can't understand it, but I cannot deny that."

"And there is some big sorrow in your life?"

"Yes," she answered in pain.

"Then, isn't that the reason I am to help?"

Then suddenly she was alive, speaking with vehemence.

"No, that cannot be the reason. That is where it seems so wrong. You cannot help me. It is impossible for you or any one to help me."

She stood still, gazing over his head, her face quick with sorrow,

"There is no means of helping me."

She stood thus for a moment. Then she turned and walked along the garden path into the house. She did not speak again.



## XXXII

PETER JOHN spent a wretched evening and endured a sleepless night.

At the earliest reputable moment next morning—and naturally that did not occur before breakfast—he had the telephone switched through to his study, and from that chamber of discretion called up the Dower House.

A woman, the housekeeper, Peter thought, or even the mystical Mrs. Patricot herself, answered, and he asked for Miss Phillippa. He had to ask twice. The entity at the other end of the wire was one of those people who treat telephone conversations as riddles. She uttered the name "Miss Phillippa" several times, as though she had to get its full, legal significance before committing herself, and Peter in his impatience, cried, "Yes, yes, she is staying at the Dower House, you know." Even to that prompting the distant creature said, "Is she?" as though mention of the dooming fact had put her on her guard.

Peter, in his exasperation, was spelling the

## GREEN LADIES

name, when a new voice intervened, and he was speaking to Phillippa herself.

He spoke to her with a certain air of embarrassment and helplessness. If he could have seen her before him it would have been easier to make his very simple request. But the telephone is the daughter of the Sphinx. Only disembodied words come over it, and it is impossible to tell the mental temper of the speaker. Peter was baffled. He wanted to know exactly what were her emotions. He wanted to know exactly where the turmoil of her thoughts (and there must obviously have been such a turmoil) had carried her. He wanted to know how she regarded him; did she think of him as an intruder on the privacy of her sorrow, or as one who had a right to so intrude. He wanted to read in her face, in her attitude, in the changing emotion of her eyes, in her gestures, the answers to a thousand questions he had asked himself all night. And merely a cool, self-possessed voice asked across the wire who it was speaking.

Peter John wanted to protest,

"Oh, but you must know, who else could it possibly be. . . ."

Instead he floundered in the way of some people when the intimidating eye of the receiver stares at them unblinkingly, that he was John,

## GREEN LADIES

Mr. Peter John, of "Green Ladies," you know, and he began a rather damp and spluttery explanation of how he had called up and couldn't make some one understand. It was the usual fatuity of a nervous caller.

When he had made his name known there had been the first sign of agitation. There had been a pause, slight and distinct, then,

"Oh . . . you want to speak to me?"

"I want to speak to you, and I want to see you," said Peter, abruptly urgent.

Again there was a brief pause, and Peter added on a note of insistence,

"I must see you. Things can't be left as they are."

He was ready for a battle. He was ready to urge and argue and persuade. He was ready to beat down all her protestations. And quite unexpectedly he heard her say in a voice of decision:

"Very well. I will wait for you on the cliff."

"Now?"

"Now."

Peter for a moment felt nonplussed. He stared at the telephone wondering whether he would say anything more, whether so laconic an exchange had satisfied all the requirements of the situation. Then he said unnecessarily,

## GREEN LADIES

"I shall start at once," and hung up the ear-piece.

But her decision had chilled him. It seemed ominous. If she had temporized he would have taken courage from her uncertainty, but her acceptance of his demand spoke of an inflexible purpose. Her mind was made up, just as it had been yesterday, when she left him to go into her house. She was only ready to meet him because she was unshakable, and because she felt it her duty to prevent him from going any further.

She was being kind to him, he felt sure. She had understood how things were with him. The meeting was no doubt to be a painful one to her, but she had the courage to face him frankly and to check any hope that might be springing up within him. The interview would hurt her, she would endure it rather than he should go on and suffer.

He walked along the cliff dreading the interview now. During the night his dread had been tempered by the ambiguity of the situation. He had explained away the firmness of her attitude in a hundred ways.

He had, he told himself, put his case very clumsily yesterday. He had dwelt too much on the strange experience they had undergone, and too little on his own love for her. Or, maybe, he

## GREEN LADIES

had startled her by the abruptness of his attack, he had thrust his way in on her when she was still a prey to the many emotions begot of abnormal happenings. There were a hundred reasons.

All these explanations of her attitude had risen to the surface of his mind during the night, and as the night wore on his desire to see her again and speak with her had grown within him. If he saw her, talked with her, persuaded her; if he could be near her arguing and pleading, he might gain the hearing of her heart.

If he could speak with her he felt he might dispel the idea which seemed to him the chief barrier between them, the idea, held perhaps with the tragic exaggeration of youth, that her part in life was a tragic one, and that the rest of her existence was limited by the boundaries of her sorrow. Whatever the cause he felt that he would be able to convince her that under no circumstances did such a finality exist. He could visualize no tragedy from which escape was impossible.

As night traveled into day he had become more and more desirous of speaking to her, and of putting his case to her in a way more definite, ardent and complete. He was supported in his resolve by the strange mystical experience they had undergone together. That must mean something.



## GREEN LADIES

That could not be denied, and he felt that it pointed to a happy consummation.

But as he walked along the cliff his spiritual force dwindled. He felt helpless. The two nights of exhaustion were, no doubt, already telling upon his strength. And her decisive acceptance over the telephone had sapped his courage.

She had made up her mind already. She would not allow him the intimacy of aiding her. Her will was firm. How could he hope to overcome her purpose?

It was with dread that he drew near her house. It was with a shrinking spirit that he saw her on the cliff, sitting and waiting for him.

She sat there quietly, calmly. Her self-possession was profound. She was already master of the field.

She was pale. The strain of the night had left its mark on her, but she was composed, too. The smile she gave him was but a pallid sister of her usual friendly greeting, but it was steady and assured. He felt that argument would not prevail against her.

He flung himself down on the grass beside her, and looked at her. He had thought of many things to say as he came along. Now he felt that nearly all he had to say was useless. In his

## GREEN LADIES

despair he groaned; he turned his face squarely to her; he cried out,

"Phyllippa . . . did you understand that all I tried to say to you yesterday evening was only that I loved you?"

She threw at him a startled, frightened glance. Her composure vanished completely. She had been prepared for reasoning, she had not been prepared for this.

"I did it clumsily," Peter told her, in his own emotion taking little heed of hers. "I did it foolishly and stupidly. All I wanted to say was 'I love you.'"

"Oh—no—no——" she cried in pain.

He did not heed her.

"I love you, nothing else matters. I got it all tangled up with this strange thing we have gone through. It seemed all mixed up with that moment of the storm, oh, and all the other moments that went before, that first meeting on the fringe of the pines, even. They are all part of it, but the whole of it is that I love you. That is what I tried to say to you, my dear, and I said it so clumsily."

She was looking at him almost with horror. She put out her hand to stop him, but he went on.

"I love you," he said again. "That is the whole of it. Perhaps I am to help you, I think

## GREEN LADIES

I am. I think everything that has happened, my disappointment about America, my coming to Hampshire, that moment I took your hand in the storm, has meant this, but before all these things I love you. You come first. It is you and you only who matter."

She had turned her face away from him. She was looking out to sea. She was deadly quiet.

"Did I put it badly yesterday? I think I did," Peter went on. "I spoke as a champion, as one who wanted to help only. I want to help, but that is nothing. That is only part of it. I want you more than any help I can give."

Then after a pause,

"I began loving you under the trees. I have found new things to love in you every day."

She sat rigidly still, staring out to sea.

Peter stopped talking. He watched her face. He knew what her answer would be. He felt he had known it all the while. In a full minute she answered him, not looking away from the sea.

"I wanted to prevent this," she said softly.

"You couldn't," he told her. "It had to be said."

"I came to meet you to prevent this."

Peter was silent for a moment. He did not feel pain. His faculties were entirely unresponsive,

## GREEN LADIES

"You mean you do not love me?"

"I am married," she answered, still in her soft voice, still staring out to sea. And at that sentence the whole fabric of his dreams collapsed. There was nothing left to be said. It forbade love, it forbade help, it forbade everything. It multiplied his experience, the experience they both seemed to have gone through. It exposed it as mere fantasy. How could he help her at all if she had a husband? The meaning which had seemed so clear now became meaningless.

Peter was dumb. He could say nothing. He could neither protest nor ask questions. He did not feel anger or agony. He was dumb. Everything, her voice, her astonishing revelation seemed part of a vast unreality. It seemed to have a blank inevitability; as though he had known all along that what he desired could not be. So they sat for many minutes.

Presently she spoke again, in that quiet voice that told of her stress of spirit,

"I have turned my back on my marriage for years. I have tried to forget it. I have never spoken of it, nor allowed other people to speak of it. I have tried to wipe it out of my memory. It never occurred to me that it might lead to this."

She stopped speaking for a moment.

## GREEN LADIES

"It is too late to ask you to forgive me," she said. "I cannot forgive myself."

Peter was still part of the vast unreality where there was neither pain, nor feeling, nor sentient thought.

"It is your tragedy?" he asked evenly.

"Yes."

"It explains a great deal of what I could not understand about you and about 'Green Ladies,' " he said, his mind branching off in an inexplicable manner to what had been the main mystery underlying the letting of his house. And he asked,

"You are, I suppose, Mrs. Patricot?"

"Yes," she said again.

Peter John presently rose to his feet.

"You are right," he said dully. "It is all wrong, that affair in the storm. It can have no meaning at all. Fate has played a trick on us both."

She stood up before him, she was white, only her high courage kept her erect and self-possessed.

"A cruel trick," she cried, her hands clasping themselves tightly before her. "How I have hurt you," she whispered.

Peter glanced at her and tried to smile.

"It has hurt us both. You have not come out of this without pain . . . and you had much to



## GREEN LADIES

bear before." Amid his unresponsive wits he groped for a sentence to explain his lack of expression. "There is no need for us to say anything or to forgive anything, you or I," he said at length. "We can understand what has happened. It is not of our asking, nor is it of our doing. We both have much to bear, and you will have to bear more than I. You have your own sorrow, and now the thought of mine."

They moved by common impulse towards the path to her house.

"It is a cruel trick," he said. "We both have to suffer."

Without speaking again, each walked their way.

He went back to "Green Ladies"; he looked at the serene beauty of the house and thought it deceitful and smug; he looked at the shining beauty of the Island and the sea and thought their beauty hateful; he glanced at the pines and he said,

"You have led me astray. You made me feel I could help. How can I help? The only way to help her is to rescue her from her tragedy. Her marriage is her tragedy—no man can rescue her from that. You have led me astray. You have made me think that by loving her I could lead her away from darkness to happiness, the hap-

## GREEN LADIES

piness of love that blinds one to sorrows. Loving her. . . . I have simply added to her tragedy. I have made for myself a new tragedy."

He sat in a chair, deep in the darkness of misery.

### XXXIII

FOR three days Peter John moved dully about "Green Ladies."

It seemed to him that he had lost all feeling and sensibility. He felt no sense of tragedy; he was not angry, he did not rebel, he simply did not feel at all. His mind was listless and apathetic. There is a drug which, when administered, deprives the sufferer of all active feeling: he can feel nothing, neither pain nor pleasure can react upon him. In a waking dream he knows all that is going on around him and is not touched by it. In this twilight of the mind Peter lived through the three days.

Only vaguely the beauty of "Green Ladies" and the views, the proximity of Phillippa troubled him. These things did not hurt. There was none of that divine poignancy about them to sting him awake. Only a degree above this numbness did he feel that there was a wrongness in the whole situation. He ought not to be here, he ought never to have come here, his position in this place of beauty was an anachronism. He ought

## GREEN LADIES

not to be within call of Phillippa, his closeness to her had been throughout the crowning folly of the whole business. For him to continue here, to be always near her, to be ever striking a false note in the whole scheme of life set out in this place, impressed him, even through his indifference, as being incorrect.

"I must go away," he told himself without emotion, but he made no attempt to move. He seemed powerless to make such a move.

He wandered about the house, he sat on the terrace, he walked down to the sea without any sense of accomplishment. He merely drifted, because drifting filled out the hours. He experienced no sensations at all in doing these things.

He knew no trains of consecutive thought. He could not examine what had happened to him, he could not arrive at any order of mind or definite conclusion. He did not try to do so. He made no movement to learn more of the tragedy of Phillippa's life. There must, naturally, be a fuller story than she had told, than she could bring herself to tell. He might get something more of that story from Eden; Mrs. Waymsley, he felt sure, would tell him much that Phillippa would not tell him. But he did not question Eden, he did not call on Mrs. Waymsley.

Once, when this thought rose insistently, he

## GREEN LADIES

shrugged his shoulders, not tragically, merely listlessly.

"What more need be known beyond the insuperable fact of her marriage?" he asked dully. "Details would be merely embroideries on the unalterable. They would not mitigate the hopelessness of the thing."

The fact of her marriage was final: it destroyed all hope.

Through all this time he neither loved nor hated Phillippa. She existed solely as an instrument of malign fortune. He acknowledged her presence near him, even her meaning to him; he felt that as things were they had no right to move in the same circle, to inflict each other upon each other. But he did not feel this as a reality. He felt he must go away, because it was something that ought to be done; he did not feel any passionate desire to fly this place, nor did he dread the poignancy of parting.

She, too, was but a shadow in this world of unreality. She, too, could not spur him awake with emotions of desire and loss.

It was only gradually that this necessity of moving away merged into something of active need, and then the feeling was one of uneasiness, of slight fretful irritation, rather than of active volition.



## GREEN LADIES

On the second night he began to dream again of the pine wood. The dream was akin to the first two dreams. Phillippa and he were in the darkness of the wood, struggling through it, hand in hand. They had reached that supreme point of blackness and despair when the powers of the night seemed omnipotent. They were still battling in that dark crisis of the dream, and yet the impressive fact arising from the dream was the promise of happiness beyond, and their certainty of reaching it.

He dreamed vividly and actually, as though the episode was a thing of the living day, and even when the living day came it seemed supremely real.

He frowned at the memory as he sat on the terrace.

"It is all wrong," he reflected. "It is misleading and wrong. I have been led astray by ghosts. It has no meaning and no consummation. It is a mirage only."

But the dream continued. On the third night he underwent the same experience, and it was more and not less real than before. It seemed as actual and as concrete as life. He woke up feeling that Phillippa and he were truly engaged in a struggle against black misfortune, that they had reached the most desperate moment of their

## GREEN LADIES

encounter, but, for all that, there was the golden promise beyond, and they had only to fight on to reach the sunlight of happiness.

During the whole of the following day Peter's discomposure was more dominant than his inertia. He could not evade the emotions of his dream. It impinged upon his listlessness. It broke into his vacancies. And always the note that disturbed him most was the dream picture of Phillippa; her vague ethereal tenderness; her slimness; the weak fluttering appeal of her brave and gentle spirit followed him out of the dream into the day. Her reliance on him, her mute and woeful appeal for his help, disturbed him. It gave him an uneasy sense of neglecting a duty, of standing aside from a task he should take up, of neglecting an effort that was to bring her to happiness.

"It is impossible to help her," he said savagely, unconscious that this feeling had stung him near to activity by its reality. And then he realized the force of the disturbing emotion, he stood up and glared at the calm beauty of the house.

"It's the whole place," he cried. "The very atmosphere of this house is impregnated with her and her sorrow. It conspires against me and against reason. I must go away from it."

It was "Green Ladies" itself, he felt, that

## GREEN LADIES

drove him forth in the end. Its very associations forced their way into his dreams. While he remained there he would always be tormented. On the next day he decided to go.

He had had his dream of the pine wood again. Again he had taken part in that experience of tragedy and yet of promise. And the dream had been more real, the note of hope more insistent.

He decided with unmoved fatality to go away, to go back to South America. There was no sense of drama in his decision. He did not think of America as the place that would kill him, but as the place where he might escape from it all. No, there was no air of sacrifice in this. South America might be the end of him, but that was merely part of the natural order of things. If it did not end him, there was work to do, and he might as well do it.

He made his decision and his plan for setting about it without any thrill of spirit. He was a little more awake now. A little more perceptive, but he was unable to experience the pang of any great emotion. He made up his mind that his first step would be to go to London on the next day. He would see people connected with South American research, discuss the whole matter and fix upon a line of action. He would stay

## GREEN LADIES

in town collecting the necessary material for his journey, and he would book a passage.

He even thought,

"I'll go by Panama. I'll look at the canal."

There were no arrangements to make for his journey. He would go by train. He would go straight to his London flat, where he had clothes and where there were servants to look after him. There was no need for delay.

He would probably come to a decision about the future of "Green Ladies" while he was in London.

But having made up his mind, he did not become less unsettled.

That night the dream of the pine wood came to him more vividly than before.

It came to him with a force and an intimacy of detail that made it more actual than every day, and its greater reality seemed to be in its promise of hope. In the dream they were no longer struggling in the valley of blackness and despair. They were mounting the side of the valley. They were going on to the promise of happiness.

Vividly and with an astounding reality this light of promise seemed near to them. They were moving up the side of the valley and the golden light which shone beyond the trees was

## GREEN LADIES

on their faces and the sound of the sea was very close.

They were mounting to that glad place of light and sea and wind. It was very near.

It was with this emotion in his heart that Peter awoke.



## XXXIV

**T**HE vivid memory of the dream, the disturbance it caused him, the undercurrent of altogether reasonless feeling that he was running away from duty it gave, betrayed Peter into irritation when he found Tristram Waymsley on the station platform.

He did not wish to meet anybody, and on the station less than anywhere else. To meet Tristram Waymsley here meant that he would have to go in the train with him, and suffer his companionship during the long journey to London. Very decisively, though he had not thought of it before, he knew the one thing he wanted was to be alone.

He detested the idea that, since they knew each other, they should feel it incumbent to share a compartment. Why should it be? Why should mere acquaintance force them into each other's society? Why couldn't they be as free as strangers and after a nod go their own way, and confine themselves in their own little cubicle of silence and contemplation on the train?

## GREEN LADIES

They could not; they played the social comedy, they nodded to each other; they asked how each other did; only when the grandson said, "Going to town?" did Peter have an impulse towards chicanery. It would be easy to draw this youth, find out if he was going to town, and then say his own destination was Southampton. It was easy to change trains at Southampton. But Peter did nothing of the sort. He said yes he was going to town.

"So am I," said Tristram; he seemed to range himself beside Peter for the journey, though the train was not signaled yet, and Peter felt that he was insufferable.

Peter was probably wrong. It is more than likely that Tristram experienced exactly the same distaste of the prospect now before him, for all masculine human nature hates to have people thrust upon it on train journeys. But Peter had been wrong all the morning.

His apathy had been less protective from the moment the dream ended. He had been restless, vague; indefinable emotions had filled him with fretfulness, and his will had been both more alive and more unstable. He had been a prey to irresolution, and he had asked himself if he ought to run away like this, was it altogether nec-

## GREEN LADIES

essary? Although by conviction he knew it was both right and proper.

And then for the first time he had known certain keennesses of emotion. Going away hurt him. Now that he was taking the irrevocable step he felt a pang at his severance from "Green Ladies." It disturbed him to realize that he would not walk on the terrace, or see the Island across the water, or look on the trees or Eden's flowers, nor see Eden himself again. He had told Eden he was going to London for a time; he had felt it impossible to tell Eden that he was going away from him for all time.

Even more acutely he felt going away from Phillippa. It was not a pain of loss, it was rather that putting so great a distance between them disturbed him. There would be no chance of seeing her; no accident would bring him in contact with her; he would be cut off from her completely. Anything might happen to her and he would not know. She might need him, and he would not know. He felt a dread at going away from her.

He had felt the stirrings of unrest and pain all the morning, and the memory of his dream swept across his mind every now and again, stirring up the unrest into tormenting eddies of worry, as though at the breath of a wind. He did not want human companionship. He was not fit for hu-

## GREEN LADIES

man companionship. But here he was tied for a journey to this young man. And presently the train came in and they were imprisoned together in an otherwise empty compartment for several hours.

Peter listened and answered as the other talked, with but a section of his mind. As he listened and answered he was conscious that the train was taking him away from Phillippa and "Green Ladies," and in an indefinable way he had a sense of something being amiss, as though something ought to have happened at the last moment to prevent his leaving. Through this vague mist of sensation rather than thought he caught the one word "Phillippa."

He glanced up at the young man, his attention more alert, his eyes perhaps, asking a question.

"Oh, not really ill," said the young man. "She is probably only run down. She worked rather hard at her hospital, and it's beginning to show effect now."

Peter was startled, not violently, but none the less decidedly. Philippa was ill, he hadn't thought of her being ill. He was perturbed.

"I didn't know she was ill," he said, staring at the youth. "She was quite well the other day, at your place."

"Oh, I didn't know until I called this morn-

## GREEN LADIES

ing . . . of course, she doesn't allow you to tell her she is ill. She's not that sort. She pretends the whole world is just the same as ever, and she is the most unchanging thing in it. But she looked pale. And she has a tired, indifferent manner that isn't her at all. You know, she tries to carry off everything with a high air, as though nothing can touch her, and she is never indifferent. . . ."

He went on describing Phillippa and her attitude towards the world. He had his family's habit of making a conversational portrait of every one and everything his eyes encountered. Perhaps he felt, too, that by talking about Phillippa, he would not have to talk about the weather. He hated talking about the weather, or anything that was a common topic, and Peter's vague responses had filled him with dread that presently all his subjects would be run through, and he would arrive at the weather by a process of exhaustion. So, Peter having shown a more active interest in Phillippa, he let himself go on Phillippa.

But after hearing she was ill, and how she was ill, Peter's mind had turned inwards again. But it had not lapsed into apathy. There was a tingling sensation of anxiety within him. She was ill, he was telling himself, and he had not known.



## GREEN LADIES

It seemed unnatural that he did not know. His very instinct, he felt, should have told him of her sickness. His lack of knowledge seemed to him, almost, a reason for bitterness.

He did not know, but other people knew. These Waymsleys knew. He felt a little stiff towards the young man. It was as though they were in a conspiracy against him. They knew everything about her, and he knew nothing. They had intimacies with her that left him outside. Even her marriage, and her name, and her peculiar position were known to them, and he knew next to nothing. He loved her, and he was the one who knew least. As he thought of that, something stirred sharply within him, and abruptly he thought,

"Well, at least I can find out something about that."

He stared at the youth before him, and in the midst of one of that youth's fine, expository sentences he asked gruffly,

"Why did you let me call her Miss Phillippa?"

The young man broke off and glanced at him in confusion. To his own immense contempt his ingenuous features became tropic in a blush.

"I don't know." He answered uneasily. "Well, I suppose you shot it at us so suddenly that we were too startled to say anything."

## GREEN LADIES

"You let me call her Miss Phillippa de Pierre, too," said Peter. "You might have pulled me up then."

"I know, I was going to say something, but my grandmother, you know, shot right across the talk. And then it was all very difficult."

"You mean the facts of Mrs. Patricot's marriage made speaking difficult?"

"Oh, you know now. Not merely that, but you see we've got into the habit of ignoring it. It's never spoken of. You know what it is in a place like this, if there's an arrangement one falls into it and it becomes second nature. I really haven't heard the name of Patricot for years. You see we always call her Phillippa, and all the people we know call her Phillippa. There's nobody we come in contact with to call her anything else."

(Peter understood that, he was the outsider, the newcomer.) "The servants, like Eden and the country people, have called her Miss Phillippa from the year dot, they never really had a chance to call her anything else."

"Didn't it strike you as strange that I should be ignorant of the name of my own landlord?"

The youth smiled.

"Deucedly queer. But I thought there might be a reason for it, and you know, my grandmother seemed to want to keep you in the dark,

## GREEN LADIES

anyhow I thought so, and so did Gabrielle, though I don't know why."

"I do now," said Peter, allowing a smile to escape him, for he saw that that vivid old Machiavelli of a grandmother was connected with the mystery of his landlord. And the smile spurred the grandson to self-confession.

"And then inside us we guessed you'd hear about it in time. As you have."

"As I have," and for no definite reason Peter felt a thrust of pain at the bitterness of his knowledge. "Even now I know little enough. The marriage wasn't a happy one? That seems implied."

"Happy!" cried the youth in astonishment.

"Good God, no!"

"They didn't get on together?"

The youth stared in wonder at the other's ignorance.

"He was an appalling brute," he cried, vehemently.

It was Peter's turn to stare in astonishment.

"An unspeakable brute, the rankest of cads," cried the youth, his vehemence carrying him away before he saw the fascinated gaze of Peter upon him. Then feeling perhaps that he had plunged deeper than a grandmother might desire, he added, "If what I hear is true."

## GREEN LADIES

Peter ignored that; he demanded in a voice which spoke of the new tempest which had sprung up within him at the shock of this knowledge,

"But how . . . how?" He had not thought of the husband. Phillippa was unhappily married and living apart from Patricot, that much went without saying, and it was tragedy enough; but that there should be something darker in the marriage, that her husband should be a black-guard, that the evil of her marriage should be an active evil, was a shock to him.

The intensity of his voice put the grandson further on guard.

"Oh, in every way," he temporized. "He was a brute; he was unclean and cruel . . . and . . . well, brute all through, so I have heard."

Again Peter ignored that and struck at the essentials.

"But how?" he insisted. "If he was all that, how did she come to marry him? What was the whole reason of it?"

The youth felt on safer ground.

"That is beyond me altogether. I was only a kid when she married. I wasn't taking much notice. I remember her marrying. I was at school, and there were mumps, so I didn't come down . . ." he was skilfully, he thought, making

## GREEN LADIES

the most of a side issue, was leading the conversation away from dangerous ground.

Only Peter was determined to pin it to dangerous ground.

"But you must know some of the facts?"

"Only what I have picked up from my grandmother." He hoped that this diplomatic mentioning of his grandmother would decide the urgent Peter to consult the main source of knowledge and leave him alone. "From my grandmother and others. It doesn't amount to more than the fact that James Patricot was a beast and a brute, and that the marriage was a calamity. Really no more than the bare outline."

"Yet you must have known him."

"Good Lord, no!" burst Tristram Waymsley with warmth, and then he delivered another shock. "I saw him, of course, once or twice, his home was about here. But he'd left her even before I went to Oxford." He saw the absolute astonishment in Peter's eyes. He supported his statement with a stout "Years before."

Peter stared at him, his mind a whirlwind of indescribable emotions. Astonishment, shock, bewilderment, hope, even elation whirled within him in an unspeakable chaos. Was this an answer? Did the dream mean this? His voice trembled when he asked,



## GREEN LADIES

"He—left her?"

"Yes," said the grandson, feeling his way to say the least he could. "He ran away from her."

"And—where is he now?" asked the trembling Peter, and the unwitting grandson launched another bolt.

"Nobody knows. He vanished."

Peter stared at his companion until that youth felt embarrassed. His eyes were fixed on Tristram's face with so much intensity that the insouciance of Oxford collapsed and more blushes arrived. But Peter did not see the face or its blushes. He was trying to take in that staggering, amazing fact. Phillippa's husband was a brute, he had left her years ago. He had vanished years ago.

His mind came back to Tristram.

"How many years ago was it?" he asked in a tone he scarcely knew. He saw the youth's embarrassment. "Do you mind telling me? I have a particular reason for asking?"

"I know so little about it," protested Tristram. "You should really ask my grandmother, she could tell you all about it."

In spite of his bewildering emotions, Peter could not repress a smile. He knew why the

## GREEN LADIES

grandson wanted to shift the responsibility to the grandmother.

"I only want to know the bare outline," he said with a smile. "And really I have a reason, if you wouldn't mind. . . ."

"Oh, . . . it was a good many years ago. . . ." Peter's eye admitted no quibble. "Perhaps ten, at least eight, I should think. But my grandmother would tell you the exact number. Really all I know I get from her."

Peter John sank back in his corner. His mind was racing, he could scarcely control the tumult of his thoughts. His mind was saying, Phillippa's husband had left her, vanished eight years ago. He vanished eight years ago.

The thought resounded through his mind with tremendous insistence. And, as he thought, he remembered his dream, and the dream seemed to be part of this thought and moment, and it's promise he seemed to read in this new knowledge. There was of course perplexity too. . . . If her husband had vanished eight years ago, why had she been so firm? Why hadn't she held out some hope. . . ? But he couldn't understand that. That was beyond his grasp just now. He could only think "He vanished eight years ago, perhaps ten," could only see that fact mixed up with the omen of his dream. This must be the meaning of

## GREEN LADIES

the dream. His thoughts were racing, his heart was racing. His apathy had been entirely dispelled. His mind ceased to be irresolute, it grasped at this straw of hope. He cried within himself, "I must get to the bottom of this. I must know more."

As the thoughts swung through his head, he turned to the youth,

"But eight years ago," he cried. "What age could she have been?"

"She was an absolute flapper," said Tristram. "A kid . . . she's only twenty-eight now."

Peter's attention was puzzled and at once anxious.

"But, if she was married at nineteen or twenty . . . would that make it eight years ago?" he asked, hoping he did not let the cold fear which had suddenly touched him appear in his voice.

"His leaving her, you mean? Easily. He left her in the first year, the brute. Within months only of the wedding. He was an appalling cad."

Peter could say nothing. The series of shocks he had experienced had deprived him of all precise thought, of all ability to reason. He sat back and stared blindly at a pictured reproduction of Bournemouth set in the wall of the carriage. He could think of nothing. He could only feel enormously.

## GREEN LADIES

The train slowed, slackened and stopped.

"Southampton West," said Tristram with the air of one who had caught the name of the station before the alert staff could hide it.

Peter sat up, and saw the name written upon the back of a seat.

"Southampton," he echoed. He stood up. "Good-bye."

"But," blurted the astonished young man. "Aren't you going to London?"

"Good-bye," said Peter again. "I get out here."

He left the train.

## XXXV

PETER made up his mind at once, or had he had his mind made up for him? He left the train, he was going back to Phillippa and "Green Ladies."

Directly the youth had made his astounding revelation, Peter had known that this was the reason why it was wrong to go away. The fact that Phillippa's husband was not living somewhere in England; an incompatible creature, yet living in more or less reputable estrangement, but one who had already put himself outside the law, first by his brutality and then by leaving her, put a different complexion on the whole business. It suggested that there were still reasons for hope. The matter had not ended. It was wrong to accept defeat at the first set-back; there was more in it than that.

"There is a struggle before we attain the light," he thought, as he stood on Southampton platform. "I didn't take that into account. It was never to be easy."

He learned that, in any case, destiny hadn't



## GREEN LADIES

managed things carefully in the matter of trains. He could not get back for hours. He went out of the station, and to the right, until, driven off the main road by the noise of the trams, he struck across an open space.

He said again,

"It's not going to be easy. I must remember that. There is to be sorrow and struggle before we gain the end. I must not be put off by rebuffs."

He said this, as he walked across the open space, which bore, he found, the inexplicable name of "The Marlands," for his thoughts had veered round to the finality of Phillippa's attitude. That wanted explaining. If James Patricot was a brute; again, if he had vanished eight years ago why had she told him with such decision that her condition was unalterable? She must know that the law would help her. Was there some other reason still to be told? Or was she, after all, ignorant of the law?

He said again,

"It's not going to be easy. There will be difficulties. But I must not be put off."

He said this, not to strengthen his purpose, but rather to impress it upon his mind in case he should ever forget it again. It was to be a mental sign manual to be turned to should circumstances again betray him into weakness.

## GREEN LADIES

His attitude of mind was singular, but quite clear. He was without excitements. He was experiencing no particular gladness of exultation. He was filled, rather, with a serenity of determination. His apathy was still within him, but now it had been turned into a calm disregard of anything that distracted him from his end, anything that seemed to forbid his going on. Serene, without emotion, passionless, he felt himself the mechanism by which the plan of a fixed destiny was to be worked out, rather than a sentient being.

"Emotions play old Harry with the will," he reflected. "It is better that I feel like this."

All the same he was not without his emotions. As he passed a theater and turned into a side street that, he had been told, led to the main road of Southampton, he remembered that Tristram had said that Phillippa was ill. She was tired, indifferent to the world, why? Before he had spoken to her at her door she had not been tired or indifferent, and the world had filled her with delight. If she had changed, she had changed because she felt as he felt; because rejection of him had meant pain to her.

Peter as he reflected on that knew a throb that was happiness as well as soreness. She was not

## GREEN LADIES

indifferent to him. To send him out of her life had meant pain.

In the main road, in the thoroughfare called "Above Bar" for the reason that it was merely the top half of a street divided by the old Bar Gate of the town, Peter looked about for a place to get lunch. He saw no place to get lunch, but he saw a garage. He forgot lunch, he walked across to the garage and hired a car to carry him back to Green Ladies. He did more than that, he telephoned to Eden and told him he was returning, and would be home to dinner that night.

Presently he was swinging through the New Forest, through Lyndhurst, where old time people had built a church on a mound so that its steeple could lead the hunting kings of England home through the wayward tracks of the Forest, and through Brockenhurst, and sleepy Lymington.

When he drew near to "Green Ladies" he told the chauffeur to go on until he came to The Dower House. And then very soon he was standing with Phillippa, in the cool bright room of oak and chintz of her own home.

She stood facing him, and he saw, not without cruel pleasure, that indeed she was ill, but with an illness that was of the mind. Her cheeks were pale, and through her calm her manner was nervous. When he came in upon her she had

## GREEN LADIES

obviously determined not to make a sign, but at the sight of him, neck and cheeks took a swift flooding of color, and her quick lips trembled. She strove to master herself, but Peter, and it must be agreed that he did it deliberately, broke down her reserve at once. He said,

"Last night I made up my mind. I decided to leave England, and go back to South America. I thought you ought to know."

His eyes were fixed greedily on her face, and if he had been cruel, his cruelty had reward. The color flooded away. Her lips opened in distress, her eyes showed him a soul frightened, hurt, cut deeply by its sense of loss.

For a moment she stood thus, her eyes bright with pain, the pliant grace of her body showing subtly her revolt against that pain. The whole expression of her delicate being gave him unmistakable knowledge that the mere loss of him, not the danger to him, but the loss, the loss of sight and chance of contact and mere proximity caused her suffering. And that was what he wanted to know. She did not want him to go away from her.

Just for a moment only she revealed this exquisite secret, and then she had control of herself. Her eyes hid their pain. Suffering she was, but she was composed. She looked at him; she asked,

## GREEN LADIES

"Why do you tell me this?" and her eyes seemed to say, "Do you think that circumstances can be made easier that way?"

Peter did not answer at once. A quiet happiness, a serenity, filled him. He knew what he most wanted to know. He looked at her, he said softly, "You love me, Phillippa?"

She dropped her eyes, the tips of her fingers pressed strongly upon the table by her side. She did not move. She did not answer him,

"You love me?" he said again.

"I answered you on the cliff," she whispered.

"You love me?" he said.

She trembled.

"It cannot alter things," she answered in a voice hardly to be heard.

"You love me?" he said again.

She lifted her face and looked into his with distressed and wounded eyes. He could see the bewilderment and appeal in her face,

"You love me?" he insisted.

"Yes," she answered in a low voice. "I love you."

The quietness in the room was a palpable thing. It was an immensity of silence, and in the heart of it they stood and looked into each other's eyes. For eternities of time they stood bound up in their glances, and all the tenderness and agony of life,



## GREEN LADIES

all the tremulous sweetness and the pain, all that they meant to each other and all that was forbidden to natures such as theirs, all the heart quickenings and the heart burnings, the desires and the frustrations, their yearnings, ardors, distresses and sorrows were intermingled in the tremendous silence of that look. Trembling they gazed at each other, pouring out their very souls into each other's eyes.

Then Peter said with a soft laugh,

"My dear . . . I had to know."

She looked away as though she could no longer bear the pain this moment caused her.

"Yes, I think you had to know. I could not help your knowing. But it makes no difference. How can it alter things?"

"I can go on now," he said, and as she glanced at him, "I have only told you half. I must tell you also that, not only did I decide to go to South America, I left for South America this morning."

Her eyes were fixed on his face, and they grew perplexed,

"You left this morning," her voice caught, she had so nearly lost him then. . . . "What made you return?"

"Tristram Waysley—Tristram Waysley, acting, I think as an envoy of destiny." He smiled, and she too was forced to smile. It would take

## GREEN LADIES

at least destiny to make that young man accomplish anything definite was the tenor of their thoughts.

"Still I don't understand."

"Tristram Waymsley told me something about your marriage, and rather more about your husband."

She became grave at once, her face was clouded with sorrow. She had been standing, and now she sat. She motioned Peter to sit, and all the while her eyes did not leave his face.

"What did he tell you?" she asked.

"He told me your husband left you, vanished, he said, many years ago."

"That is true," she answered quietly. "It was eight years ago."

Peter let her see the wonder in his eyes; her apparent indifference to all this filled him with astonishment.

"But don't you see," he protested, "that is exactly why I came back."

She looked down at her hands, she was still for a moment.

"You mean," she said speaking slowly. . . .  
"You were thinking that under certain circumstances, if no trace of the husband has been found for seven years the law allows the wife to presume his death."

## GREEN LADIES

Peter nodded, she knew all the time, and hadn't acted upon it. . . . why . . . ?

"That is what I meant," he said.

"I cannot presume my husband's death," she looked up at him with calm sorrow in which was also an air of austere resolve.

"You mean," said Peter, and it seemed to him he knew the answer before he asked, "you mean you know your husband isn't dead?"

"He was alive five years ago," she told him and in answer to Peter's look. "Tristram Waymsley did not know. Only I and my lawyers know. But I did not mean that, I mean that if my husband were alive, if I had no reason to think him dead, then that would not make any difference."

Peter sat quietly. Now that the fact was out, he realized that he had expected nothing less. It came to him as a confirmation not as a shock. To her her husband was alive. Until she had proof of his death he was alive. To her legal loopholes did not matter for she would not avail herself of them. Her husband had been a brute, he had treated her disgracefully, he had been unclean, as Tristram Waymsley had hinted, but she was staunch to her contract with him. Her own austere and pure outlook forbade her to look at the matter in any other light. Her marriage bound her until death. Her confession of love

## GREEN LADIES

did not alter her attitude. She had been betrayed into love, but she would never be betrayed by it.

Peter was less disturbed by the knowledge than seemed possible. He felt indeed, as though this fact, black though it was, did not matter. He felt that it did not end here, they had more discoveries to make. And he had a curiously assured feeling that, in some inexplicable way, he of all men was the one man to make them. The dream, Tristram's revelations, the knowledge that Phillippa loved him, all supported him in this. A curious detachment of calmness was in him. He must not be put off. Dark though the future looked, he had still to go on.

But for all that there was a faint sense of resentment at her attitude, at her austere stubbornness; before he could check the impulse, he had blurted out,

"But he was a brute, if what I hear . . . ."

Her face filled with distress,

"Please," she pleaded with tears in her eyes. "Please don't touch on that. I am answering everything you ask, I am willing to answer anything you have a right to know." She held her head bravely, but she could not prevent the color coming to her cheeks, "But if you can spare me. . . ."

"My dear," he said, "it was a cruel remark.

## GREEN LADIES

It was a touch of the unregenerate brute coming out. Forgive me!" Partly to turn the conversation, partly because he must know he said,

"You heard of your husband five years ago, you have heard nothing of him since then? Nothing at all?"

"Nothing. He was lost sight of then. My lawyers kept touch with him up to that time, but then he disappeared and there has been no further trace."

"Was he in England?"

"In Malacca. He left England when he left me and traveled over the world," she told him. Her hands clasped each other nervously in her lap, and suddenly she cried out with the spontaneity of confession, "Oh, they tried to find some trace. I wrote to the lawyers only a few days ago" (could anything have prevented Peter's heart from leaping to that "few days ago"?), "but they say there is nothing to add to the old reports. The people who had the case in hand in Malacca have sent them no fresh news."

Peter was thinking of what might happen to a man in five years, particularly in the last five years.

"It has been a fateful five years," he told her. "War and death everywhere, he may be dead.



## GREEN LADIES

It is conceivable he might have been killed as so many others have been killed."

She did not answer, she gazed in hopeless distress out of the window, and he understood her feeling. He too could see the vast and entangled scheme of the world war; he too could realize how easily one man might be engulfed in it and have his track forever lost.

It was a dismaying thought, and yet, though he realized it, he was not overcome with dismay. The illogical optimism that had come to him filled him with a strong confidence. He felt the sense of destiny very profoundly. It was a big and dismaying task confronting them, but he felt, and there was no reason at all in his thinking it, that in a particular way it was ordained that he should accomplish the task. All through his illness, his going to "Green Ladies," his love for this girl there had been, he felt, something more than mere chance at work.

He was confident. The unexpected revelation of the husband's desertion following so closely on the promise of the dream had made him confident. Phillippa's confession of her love had made him more confident, and, moreover, had put him in the right.

"We will find what has happened to your husband," he said evenly. "I feel that there is some-

## GREEN LADIES

thing for us to find out. I will go out to Malacca myself, if necessary."

Phillippa looked at him quickly, she had remembered what he had forgotten, as man will when he chases a dream, his illness. She smiled at him, a purely woman's smile, in which tenderness, and the eternal knowledge that man needs an enormous amount of looking after were delicately blended.

"The lawyers cabled out again four days ago," she saw he must understand the meaning of that, and her blushes and her soft laughter mingled. "We shall see what that brings to light."

"Meanwhile we wait," said Peter.

But half an hour later he added to that, "Meanwhile we learn as much as we can. We tackle that Delphic old grandmother."

He was on his way to Milton Little. There were certain things Phillippa would not tell him, and he could not bring himself to ask about her marriage, but his attitude in respect to Mrs. Waymsley was ruthlessness itself.

## XXXVI

**S**ITTING in the presence of the brisk and vivid, the impenitently young old lady, grandmother enough to know better, Peter John felt himself reflecting and returning some of her spritely vivacity and cheerfulness.

She sat before him knitting a woolly labyrinth for some unsuspecting cottage baby, and she threw at him glances that were as darting, as bright and as birdlike as the play of her clicking needles.

There was a good deal of the quizzical in her glance, as though she knew rather more than she need tell of the human comedy, and found what she need not tell intensely amusing.

"How's 'Green Ladies' and Eden, and that motorist young man who talks in the way other people write? And how are you?"

Peter looked at her calmly, allowing the flow of her talk to splash off him.

"I came to tell you I have proposed to Philippa Patricot," he said, watching her.

A bright smile, a smile of unabashed delight, parted her merry old lips.

## GREEN LADIES

"Oh—oh . . . " she began, and then with smiling guile, "Indeed."

"I thought you ought to know."

"Ought?" she darted at him, and he felt that she was enjoying it all. "Ought? But why ought I know? Why should you go about the world telling your proposals?"

"Because," said Peter John, with mock gravity, "because it's exactly what you wanted me to do."

The brisk old lady, lifted her firm round chin and chuckled with delight.

"I . . . . . I?" she smiled. "I wanted you to? What had I to do with it? You'll be saying I encouraged you presently."

"Not presently," Peter retorted, "now. You encouraged me."

She dropped her hands and her knitting into her lap, she laughed unaffectedly.

"Well, I encouraged you, did I? . . . And how did I manage it? How did this matchmaking old thing, me, manage to insert the right word. . . . ?"

"Did I say word? I withdraw 'word.' The trick was done by an absence of words; by, what shall we call it?—an accomplished silence."

Peter's air was as quizzical as her own, but there was behind it a note of sobriety. They exchanged glances, and, perhaps, after all, there was

## GREEN LADIES

beneath her laughter a gravity also. The gravity of the old and the wise who watch youth, and can suffer when it sees youth missing its chances. They exchanged glances, and they knew that they understood and loved each other very well.

"Confess it," said Peter. "When a word could have been said, when a married name could have been mentioned, you did not mention it, you did not allow grandchildren to mention it."

Her small, plump, capable hands picked up the wool work with a deprecating gesture, a gesture of confession.

"You are made for each other," she said, and there was defiance, and perhaps wistfulness in her smile.

"You are entirely unashamed?" said Peter, looking at her whimsically but intently.

"Yes," she cried. Her face more sober. "Yes," she said again firmly. "You are both young, you both have good looks and brains and character and all the things that count. And there are many years before you both."

"And one of us is married," said Peter grimly.

"Pish!" said the old lady. Her needles sawed the air in contempt; that was what she thought of the marriage.

"This marriage," said Peter judicially, watching her closely, "the fact that one of us is mar-



## GREEN LADIES

ried, doesn't seem to you to constitute a serious obstacle?"

"I don't call this a marriage," said the old lady decisively. "There was not, in fact, the slightest bit of marriage about it. Besides, my dear man, the fellow left her ten years ago."

"Only eight," grinned Peter.

"Seven would be quite enough," she continued vividly.

"And he was alive five years ago," added Peter, implacably.

"Oh," she cried her eyes widening, and she was obviously taken aback. But she wasn't non-plussed. "Five years. A long time—and this war."

"I mentioned it to Phillippa," said Peter.

She looked at him, her lips smiling, her bright eyes, narrowed a little to study him, grave enough. She understood him at once. She read into his remark all that had occurred between Phillippa and himself. She saw that he had tested Phillippa's attitude towards her marriage and found her obdurate. She looked at him for a moment so, then said dryly,

"Phillippa is young."

Peter shrugged his shoulders. He was not old enough himself to find comfort in the youngness of youth.

## GREEN LADIES

"And she has been in love with you, how long—is it quite a week?"

"I merely said I had proposed to her," protested Peter. "You mustn't build a young grandmother's tale out of that one single fact."

The young grandmother proceeded to knit. She sat there a wise old woman of laughter, knowing what she knew and that was all the world and the currents of all the life and youth in the world.

Her enigmatical silence goaded Peter to argument.

"Phillippa being young, Phillippa having—having loved me for no more than a week, how does that promise a change of attitude?"

The old lady continued to knit.

"The young are Spartans," she said gently. "There are none so inflexible as the young."

"Well?"

"And have you ever asked yourself why that is?"

"I am myself accused of being young," said Peter. "Perhaps I couldn't answer."

She nodded at him, agreeing with him, appreciating his quickness.

"It's because they have ideas and not experience," she said. "They have ideas; cold, pure, inflexible ideas; beautiful and noble ideas; cruelly

## GREEN LADIES

exact ideas. And they hold them so unbendingly because not having had to bend them they think they can never bend. It is easy to be unyielding when one is not called upon to yield. And it is so easy to yield, my friend, when the whole weight of life and desire and need is the pressure that compels." She smiled at him. "You have, perhaps, not asked yourself why middle age is so much less inflexible, though you may have noticed that old age is not always even scrupulous."

"If you mean yourself, let me tell you that you are younger than any one ought to be, and entirely unprincipled; you are a confusion to your own philosophy," smiled Peter. "But are you really suggesting that one should give up one's principles simply because one's heart pulls one in a certain direction?"

"I am suggesting that one lives and learns," smiled the old lady.

"That one's ideas might be modified by experiences?"

"Or softened," she smiled.

Peter meditated for a moment on this. Then he said,

"In the case of Phillippa's marriage—" and she interrupted again with that contemptuous gesture of her needles.

"It's not a case; it wasn't a marriage."

## GREEN LADIES

"There are others who seem to think it material."

The flutter of her hands said, "Youth! Youth! The exaggerated airs of youth."

"Well, what do you think of it?" she demanded.

"I know nothing about it," he told her. "I heard this morning that James Patricot had left her eight years ago and that he was an appalling brute, the rankest of cads."

"Tristram . . . " she cried.

"Yes, he let the cat out of the bag, and then he tried to save the situation by sending me to you. He had great confidence in your craft. He is wise in his generation."

The old lady smiled again.

"And you know no more?"

"You know everything I know. Why wasn't Phillippa's marriage a marriage?"

She ceased to smile, she looked at him keenly,

"Would you call three days a marriage?"

He stared at her, startled.

"That was the length of Phillippa's marriage," she said.

Peter gasped, he looked his confusion of thought.

"For heaven's sake . . . ?" he pleaded.

"That was the length of it," she declared.

## GREEN LADIES

"After that time it ceased and in three months he had left her."

Peter was utterly bewildered, and his heart was torn by his sorrow for the girl.

"What an unspeakable tragedy," he said. "How did it come about?"

"Because James Patricot was a brute, he had always been a brute, he always would be a brute. Even while he was making love to Phillippa, while the arrangements for the wedding were going forward, there was a woman." Peter exclaimed in pain and disgust. "Yes, it's inconceivable but it's true. A common wretch of a woman, she lived not far away, he found it handy to—to go to her while he was occupied with the details of his marriage. Oh! he was thoroughly vile, and three days after the wedding this creature turned up at 'Green Ladies.' She was drunk, and there was a scene, she made her status unmistakable."

Peter sat still with horror in his eyes. He was overwhelmed by the revolting picture conjured up by the old lady. So vile was it, he was trying to convince himself that it could be real.

The wise old lady read his thoughts.

"You find it hard to believe, don't you? You'll have to believe it, it is a fact."

"It's monstrous," he murmured with dry lips. "To happen to her."



## GREEN LADIES

"It was monstrous," said the old lady. She looked at him kindly. "You understand why it is never mentioned, why it cannot be talked about. We never speak about it—only you must know."

"I can't understand the beginning or the end of it," cried Peter in distress. "How could she have married that sort of man?"

"How could a girl of nineteen know he was that sort of man?" she answered crisply. She saw that this did not satisfy him. "How could anybody know he was that sort of man? That sort don't blazon its infamy from the housetops. James Patricot was just one of the young men about here. He wasn't very much older than Phillippa, a year or two. He was part of the youth of the place, he behaved in no way differently on the surface. He was taken at face value, how else could he be taken, depravity doesn't wear an outward sign? He was depraved but he kept it to himself."

"The woman, this woman, wasn't the only thing against him?" said Peter, catching more from the inflection of her voice than her words told.

"No," she answered soberly. "When it was too late, a great deal more came out. It generally does, too late. There was enough to prove that

## GREEN LADIES

he had been rotten for years. He was born like that perhaps."

She reflected.

"You see, he could keep things quiet. He was his own master, he had the remnants of a small estate here—it's all gone now. When he ran off the debts poured in and swept up the place. His parents were dead. There was no check on him, and nobody noticed his habits. And he didn't let his private life intrude upon his public goings and comings. We all thought him rather a nice boy—until we found out he had simply been laughing at us. He was handsome, you know, and had good manners, and possessed a sort of spurious cleverness. Oh, he passed well enough in our crowd."

"And Phillippa," Peter's voice was a little harsh, "I suppose she was in love with him?"

"Do you?" smiled the old lady. "Well, I won't be so decided. Does a girl of nineteen, or even twenty, know when she is in love? Oh, there was an attraction, they got on well together, I won't deny that; but does a young, untried girl, full of romance, as sentimental as one of Shakespeare's sighing ladies, full of candor and innocence and sympathy—can she love? Does she experience the grand passion, the overwhelming immensity of the thing? Or is it, merely, again,

## GREEN LADIES

this untried idea?" Her bright eyes snapped at him in raillery, "this bright and ingenuous idea, which, having no experience at all of love, is perfectly confident that this calf affection is undoubtedly it."

"And you don't think it was?"

"I knew Phillippa," she reflected. "To what you see in her now add an innocence in affection, a simplicity of character, a willingness to accept everything as good, a shining desire to love everybody, a nature as pliant as gold. Don't you think a man who wanted her, a man of James Patricot's character, could win her? The very skill and cunning he had learnt in his vices would be powerful to win such a nature as hers."

"Oh, don't," cried Peter in horror. "It's infamous."

"It's hateful, but it's true," said the wise old woman. "These men are practiced in love, and we have to recognize their power. Don't you think a man like that could throw a web round a young, inexperienced innocent like Phillippa and make her think the artificial was real? I think so."

"You are much wiser than I," said Peter. "You are right, I think."

"And then there were other things. Facts that mustn't be overlooked. Phillippa was practically

## GREEN LADIES

alone, her father died fifteen years ago, her mother was then on the way to die—she did die a year after the marriage. Phillippa was alone, she would presently have the burden of 'Green Ladies' upon her shoulders; already she knew that her mother was anxious about her, that her last days were colored by the dread that she might leave her daughter alone, unsettled. . . . Don't you think those things might have added their weight to the current of circumstances setting in favor of her marriage? Remember there was nothing against Patricot then, he seemed as likely a match as a dozen others. And indeed, she might have chosen one of the others as far as her affection was concerned; only James Patricot got in first, and made sure that he would be first."

Peter reflected, he agreed with her.

"It's a horrible thing, life, at times, but I can't deny that you are right. . . . They married, and that woman came, and after that?"

"I cannot tell you much of that . . . nobody ever will. Phillippa keeps that locked in her heart. They were at 'Green Ladies,' the mother was so ill, you know, so they did not go away, and the woman turned up. It must have been a loathsome business, she was very drunk, she had no scruple about demanding her rights publicly. All the servants learned. But what happened to

## GREEN LADIES

them, what happened to the girl outraged in every idea, every holy thought, I cannot tell you. One can only picture, and that dimly, the horror of it. What happened I don't know; . . . there must have been a terrible hour. But he left the house, went and stayed at Lymington . . . . unrepentant."

Peter's distressed face demanded what she meant by that.

"The woman joined him in a week," she said. "And when Phillippa made advances to him—he flung them back in her face. Since he had nothing to lose now he preferred his own way of living."

"She—she tried to get him to come back, you mean that?" asked Peter. But he was not astonished. He already knew enough of Phillippa's character to know she would do that.

"Youth—youth," said the old woman, with a moisture in her eyes, "youth has its ideas of duty, its ideas of sacrifice. It demands sacrifice, it demands to bear all the burdens it has taken up. Yes, Phillippa asked him to come back. Her mother told me that before she died. She asked that brute to return, to accept her help in living straight and clean, she offered him his chance of beginning all over again. And he flung back her



## GREEN LADIES

brave and pitiable pleading in her face—thank God."

She knitted and Peter had nothing to say.

"He couldn't have changed," she went on. "He was rotten all through. Life with him would have been an unspeakable thing. Thank God he refused . . . and three months after he cut the country. He ran away, vanished. Not because of Phillippa. He was just sick of that other woman, he ran away from her, and from his debts. I have never heard of him since. Until you told me, I didn't know Phillippa had heard."

"Her lawyers have kept in touch," Peter said, "she told me that." And they both fell silent.

"What has she been doing since?" asked Peter, not because he particularly wanted to know, but to give him time to think. "She hasn't been living at 'Green Ladies,' I understand."

"No, 'Green Ladies' hurts her too much. She tried to put it all behind her. She has been doing hospital work. She underwent training at a hospital; that took up many years, and she let 'Green Ladies.' She has continued her nursing in various parts of England until now, but the strain of the last years has told on her, and she has had to give it up. She went to 'Green Ladies' occasionally, when she had her holidays, and when it was not let; she can't help going back, though it is

## GREEN LADIES

painful. She prefers to let it, and place herself outside temptation."

Peter John had not followed her in all she said, his thoughts were dwelling on the sad story of Phillippa's life, the unmitigated tragedy of it, his thoughts were considering her need for happiness, and yet, how could such a nature as hers possibly enter upon happiness if her husband was alive.

"I don't quite see how—how all this bears upon the case, upon us, upon me," he said at last and slowly. "There is again the fact that she is married."

"For three days," said the old lady sweepingly. "And to a brute."

"Even those facts won't break a marriage. Even if he was a brute. . . "

The old lady went on knitting.

"Even if she had grounds," argued Peter.

The old lady went on knitting.

"Even if she was married only three days."

The old lady smiled. Peter glanced at her nettled,

"She wouldn't think of divorce."

He glanced at this aged and mellow Penelope.

"Would you countenance divorce?" he asked bluffly.

"Not in people who were really married," she retorted and went on knitting.

## GREEN LADIES

"Then what on earth do you mean?" asked Peter with smiling impatience.

"My dear, I don't know," said the old lady whimsically. "I think it merely means that I love Phillippa, and hope so much for her. She is so young, her life has been so sorrowful, she has never loved, and she was never truly married . . . and there is so much of her life to be lived that it hurts me to think that she will not take what is now promised to her. And it seems to me that she is only just beginning to feel the warmth of life—oh, my old eyes can see things—and that in the warmth of her heart she will be softer, less firm, and that, if she has the chance, she will not be so obdurate. . . . Do I think it, or do I only hope it? I want so much for her, she has such a dear and noble nature; life could be so ample for her . . . and I want her to take this good chance. Perhaps her weakness will be a divine aid. Her husband has been gone from her eight years; perhaps now she will not be so inflexible, perhaps she will accept her chance. . . . maybe that is all that an old woman means, my dear."

She stopped and gazed dreamily before her,

"And then, you know," she added with a quiet smile that was astonishingly assured, "I have a presentiment. I have an old woman's intuition that this is going to work out right."

## GREEN LADIES

Peter looked at her in surprise.

"I have it too," he told her, "I have it in my bones. Doesn't it seem extraordinary?"

"No," she said, "it doesn't. Very little is extraordinary in this world."

Peter puzzled things out.

"I feel as though I knew, actually and tangibly knew, that something has happened to James Patricot in the last five years. And that I am the one person who can make it known—my very coming to 'Green Ladies' seems part of that . . . as though I was sent here and to Phillippa to fulfill this definite end."

"Do you feel that?" she asked. "You may be right—and in five such years anything might happen."

"He might have died like others?"

"Very easily. He was a brute, but he would have gone to fight."

"But to find out, to pick him out in all that big mess of affairs—it's a dismaying thought."

"Not if you're the one to pick him out," said the old lady.

Peter stood up,

"But don't you see, that would make me a creature of destiny."

"Oh, but don't you feel you are?" she cried laughing. "Don't you feel that you are Phil-

## GREEN LADIES

lippa's destiny . . . ? Well . . . well . . . if you are, if that's what you are, it must all work right through you."

And with that cryptic saying in his head Peter walked home.



## XXXVII

PETER carried the old lady's oracular remark with him a day later when he went to Phillippa and read the cable she had to show him.

She sat quietly in the big, decorative room of The Dower House. She was neither tragic nor happy, but passive as one whom nothing can move. And her greeting was the cablegram. She held it out to him.

Peter read,

"Nothing known of J. Patricot in Malacca since spring, 1914."

The lawyers, Howlett and Wink, had inclosed this in a letter. They insisted, as firmly as lawyers know how, that their agent in the East was a reputable fellow. They intimated that this man had had his instructions five years ago, and at intervals he had been reminded of them. The lawyers made it perfectly clear that if their man said that J. Patricot could not be found, then there wasn't even a stone in the Straits Settlements

## GREEN LADIES

under which any one could discover a trace of him.

Peter studied the cable and the letter in silence, bending over them. He held them in his hand long after he had read them, for his thoughts were facing the giant scheme of a world made chaotic by war, and the seeming hopelessness of finding one man in that vast and tangled scheme.

But he remembered the words, "If you are the one to pick him out . . ." and though the problem was so huge he felt a curious sense of certainty rather than dismay. He gave her the papers back smiling a little,

"We will find him," he said.

She lifted her hands in a tiny gesture, it spoke of her hopelessness, of her despair more eloquently than words.

"Yesterday," said Peter, "an old sibyl said to me, 'If you are Phillippa's destiny, well, then it must all work right through you.'"

"An old sibyl?" she asked, half frowning, half smiling.

"A wise old woman, an old witch, Mrs. Waymsley."

She smiled outright through her trouble.

"She may want you to be my destiny," she said.

"We both felt it in our bones," Peter smiled.

"We both felt a presentiment."

## GREEN LADIES

"But feeling things, desiring things, wanting them with all your heart," she cried out with a startling, low fervor, "they're the very reasons that lead us astray. We want things so much that we think they must come to us. Our feelings betray us. We read into everything the pointing finger of destiny. We find what we are looking for in everything, every omen. . . . But there are the facts . . . ." She lifted the papers and let them drop . . . "There are the facts."

Sitting erect, gazing before her, her face pale and tragic, she seemed to confront an intolerable anguish that wrung her to her soul.

"Peter," she said presently, "Peter, my dear, I want it all so much. I want it all to come right but that is no reason to evade the truth. I have known so much—misery. I will not risk another betrayal of—of my hopes. We have our hopes, our feelings, our presentiments. . . . what is the good of one of them against this . . . ?"

She held up the cable.

"You have had your presentiments too?"

She sat quietly and did not answer. He went on,

"That moment in the storm, when I stretched out my hand as you knelt by the rail . . . I stretched out my hand and caught yours. In some way, in a way we cannot explain, our hands

## GREEN LADIES

clasped together. I felt it, you felt it . . . ” She bowed her head . . . “Doesn’t that mean something, don’t you think?”

“Does it undo this, Peter?” she asked touching the papers.

“Who knows, perhaps it does, perhaps it is a sign that it will be undone. And then that is not the first of the signs . . . ”

She turned facing him quickly, her eyes leapt to his, her lips parted as though to speak. But she did not.

“And not the last,” Peter went on. “On the first night I came, on the first night I saw you, I had a dream. I went into that pine wood with you, in that dream, and it was awfully dark, and we moved forward side by side. Away beyond the last trunks there was a golden light and the noise of the sea and the wind. But the blackness lay between us and the light, and before we could reach it we had to overcome the evil of the darkness.”

An exclamation came from her, an exclamation as soft as a breath, her face was startled and mystified,

“But you know it?” he cried sharply.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“You have dreamed that dream?”

“Yes.”

## GREEN LADIES

"And since the night of the storm?"

"Yes."

"Always the same dream, the darkness and our struggle hand in hand, and the golden light that meant promise?"

"Always the same," she answered in her low, perturbed voice.

"And two nights ago, the night before I left for London, the night before I came back to you, how was it with us then in the dream?"

She had to control herself before speaking,

"We were going up the slope of the valley; we were winning against the darkness, and the light beyond the trees was shining in our faces, it was very near; we could hear the sound of the wind and the water almost on us."

"Yes, that was my dream too. And it means nothing to you?"

Her hands fluttered down to the lawyer's papers. That was her answer.

"It has a meaning to me," he told her. "At first I was wrong, or, perhaps, half right only. I thought it meant merely happiness for me. You see, I was filled with my stupid little tragedy. I thought the world had broken into pieces under me. . . . I looked at it with my eyes only. It seemed to me that it meant that this spirit of the dream, of the woods, of 'Green Ladies' . . .



## GREEN LADIES

*you*, you were to lead me to a new world, were to be the means of my passing from sorrow to happiness."

He paused.

"Perhaps it wasn't so far wrong, as I looked at it. You were, you are, to be the means of happiness for me. . . . But I had a part, too. I had my rôle to play too. I was to help you. I was to catch you by the hand and lead you forward to that golden land beyond the last of the trees. I was to help you when the powers of darkness seemed to prevail. That is the rôle I saw myself in, I see myself in. I am to help you. I and I alone am to be the means of overcoming the blackness of your tragedy, and of bringing you to the light. Don't you read it like that?"

Her hands gripped tightly one on the other.

"How can I?" she murmured. "How can I?"

"You must have had some feelings?"

"Feelings," she murmured, "yes—the things that betray us."

"What were they?"

"Can they matter?"

"Please?"

She smiled wanly, she spoke as one indulgent to a whim of the beloved.

"I felt as you did. I felt that both of us were to win through from that darkness of sorrow to

## GREEN LADIES

—to that golden land. We had both known misery, that was the blackness, and we were both to help each other to happiness."

"And the last dream, when we were breasting up the slope, and the light was in our faces, what did it mean to you?"

She did not answer.

"Didn't it seem to you that happiness was now very near; very close indeed; almost in our grasp?" The papers rustled in her hand. "Didn't it?" he insisted.

"Yes," she answered.

Peter smiled at her.

"It's unmistakable. We can't deny it means something."

"I wish I had your faith," she answered smiling with him. But she looked ruefully at the papers.

"Oh, those," said Peter. "Our task is to deal with those. We must get the bottom of the mystery behind them."

"How?"

"We must begin where they leave off. I must take up the chase where they drop it."

"In Malacca?" she cried, her hands lifted and caught at the breast of her dress. "You will go there?"

"If necessary," he told her, and he wasn't altogether ignorant or displeased at her agitation.

## GREEN LADIES

"Do you know what he was doing in Malacca?"

"The lawyers know," she answered nervously.

"They kept track of him all the time. I gave them those instructions."

Peter read her manner rightly. There were things she was not willing to tell him about James Patricot.

"Would you mind my going to the lawyers?"

She hesitated.

"We must give destiny every chance," he urged.

"I have been led as far as the lawyer by destiny. Perhaps I will find what we want there."

"Very well," she answered.

And Peter left for London that evening.

### XXXVIII

**M**R. WINK, of Howlett and Wink, did not dispense law, he pontificated in a continual round of legal ritual. He had, as he protested, nothing to add to his reports in the matter of James Patricot, but he said this with a bell, book and candle, and an incessant moral bowing to the East.

He had read Phillippa's letter of introduction and explanation without speaking, though he had managed to make even his silence tingling and impressive. He was a large man with a superabundant forehead, and lips so big and firm that Peter had the impression he had had them specially made for him to keep back indiscreet utterances. He sat largely and superabundantly at his desk, and there was about him an air of vivid negation.

He read the letter, and after going through this, as it were legal collect, he put it solemnly down. He said nothing and he stared at Peter. He had nothing to say. His letter to Phillippa inclosing the cable had enunciated a dogma, and to say anything more would be to place himself in danger of committing the sin of heresy.

## GREEN LADIES

Peter, very blandly, committed heresy, he said, "You are quite confident that there is really no chance of picking up James Patricot's track after his break at Malacca in 1914?"

With difficulty Mr. Wink prepared to grapple with agnosticism.

"Nothing has been left undone," he boomed. "No stone has been left unturned."

"How came it that he was lost sight of?"

"Ah," breathed Mr. Wink, as one might say "who can prevail against an act of Providence," but recognizing that Peter was an agnostic and not concerned with legal Providence, he said, "He left suddenly, in the night our agent thinks. Our agent thinks the action was deliberate." He reflected maturely. "We agree with our agent."

Peter frowned his puzzlement.

"Deliberately, you mean that he knew that he was being watched?"

Mr. Wink showed solemn surprise. It was not a display of emotion, it was a method of business. He wished to impress Peter's ignorance upon him, and also to draw him out.

"We were not watching him," he said, as though Peter must really appreciate the full value of terms. "We were keeping in touch with him."

"There is a good deal of the matter of which I



## GREEN LADIES

am ignorant," declared Peter. "Would you mind telling me the whole of it?"

Mr. Wink glanced carefully at Phillippa's letter to discover if he had a loophole for refusal. Phillippa's letter left no such loophole, with a palpable air of resignation, he answered,

"Our instructions were to keep in touch with him and to help him."

Peter thought and nodded. Yes, that was Phillippa's way. Mere negation would not be her part in duty, she had to act.

"With money, I suppose?"

"Yes, we had our instructions to extend financial help to him. In fact Mrs. Patricot had set aside a definite allowance which we were to make to him. However, he never accepted it."

"He refused all such assistance?"

"With contumely," said Mr. Wink, obviously enjoying the flavor of the word.

"What do you mean by that exactly?"

Mr. Wink with solemnity selected one from the many papers in a deed box. He handed it to Peter,

"That was the last refusal," he said. "It was returned, judging from the postmark on the envelope, two days before Patricot vanished."

Peter held in his hand a check for a large sum drawn on a Malacca bank. The fact in itself was

## GREEN LADIES

not the arresting thing. Across the back of it was written in heavy, black, up and down pen strokes of curiously individual and angular writing,

I've told you before to go to Hell with your money. Stop behaving like a driveling school girl. And for God's sake leave me alone.

Peter stared at the writing fascinated by it, startled by it, shocked by it, his heart furiously beating. Directly he had seen the writing, something had leaped within him, something had cried out, 'This is why you were sent to the lawyers, Peter John.'

"That," said Mr. Wink, "was sent without covering letter to Mrs. Patricot at 'Green Ladies.' Every check, I might say, was so treated."

Peter could not take his eyes from the strange, uncouth, evil and distinctive writing, it was almost incredible that he should know it, yet, all the same, his knowing it had the now recognized flavor of inevitability.

"He was," pursued Mr. Wink, "he was unrepentant and determined to go his own way untrammelled. He would not brook any attempt to win him back. He was, if you will allow me to say, inured to his evil habits, satisfied with them."

Peter was hypnotized by the writing.

"It is a strange handwriting," he said.

## GREEN LADIES

"He was a strange character," said Mr. Wink, frail before this blessed chance of moralizing. "There are some men, Mr. John, who seem born to follow the paths of evil. He was one of them. He selected the crooked way instinctively; if he had the choice of good or ill, he turned almost naturally to the ill. One does not like to say it, one, almost, cannot conceive it possible, but he seemed happiest when leading a wicked life. Goodness, honesty, chastity, the ordinary decencies of life were irksome to him. There are few, fortunately only a few, who have wickedness in their very blood, such was James Patricot. He . . ."

Peter interrupted, he was still staring at the strange writing.

"I have seen this writing before," he said. "I have seen it recently."

"Oh," said Mr. Wink, startled also and looking at him closely. "Where?"

"I am trying to remember," said Peter. "It was recently, I am sure. Within say the last few years, but where—I don't know."

His heart was beating, his pulse was throbbing. He felt as one who had stumbled on the key-point of all this business, all this mystery. He felt that he had an answer to all the strange happenings in

## GREEN LADIES

his hand. He was very near to the solution . . . but . . . but where had he seen the writing!

"You can't recollect?" said the lawyer anxiously.

"No, I seem so near to remembering, only—only, it is just outside actual grasp."

"It means a very great deal if you do," said Mr. Wink, as though impressing him with the fact that he was in great danger of playing ducks and drakes with the majesty of the law.

"I know . . . I know . . . " cried Peter. "I have seen it somewhere—within recent years. It's not a writing that one would forget."

"No," said the lawyer, and then as though it were a separate answer, "No."

They both waited in silence for ten minutes, Mr. Wink giving Peter an opportunity to rack his brain. Peter was racking them. Then,

"No, I can't place it yet," said Peter.

"You must try," said the lawyer and they were again ineffectually silent.

After due reflection Mr. Wink said,

"To have seen it in the space of, say, a few years, and then only, possibly by chance," he waved his hand, "that may not, when we come to the rock bottom, help us."

"It seems to me much more real than mere chance, . . . and I think it was close enough

## GREEN LADIES

to make it seem useful to us. . . . Well, the recollection is so very vivid."

The lawyer stared at him.

"It may come to you in time."

"It will," said Peter. "I am certain it will. May I keep this?"

"By all means," said the lawyer. They were both silent, thinking. Peter, staring at the writing, his heart throbbing as he considered it, his mind amazed by its familiarity, yet baffled to place it in his memory.

The lawyer, after weighing the effect of his remark, said,

"There is the contingency, we must be prepared for it, that since you remember the writing, remember having seen it within a year or two, James Patricot is alive."

Peter's heart stopped beating. He glanced up from the writing and looked at the lawyer.

"Yes," he said painfully, "there is that contingency."

"Not that Mrs. Patricot hasn't a case against this fellow," said Mr. Wink with an approach to judicial sympathy. "She has a winning case all through. There is not only that initial infamy, but in Australia, New Zealand, even in Malacca, and elsewhere our agents have found material



## GREEN LADIES

enough to make any proceeding an absolutely foregone conclusion."

They looked at each other, understanding each other and Phillippa completely. It was because he understood Phillippa that the lawyer's next remark was a lame one,

"It is more than possible also, that the man would not defend his case. Would be glad to break a bond. . . ."

He stopped, he looked at Peter, he knew that it was not very material to continue.

"I don't think we need consider the likelihood of proceedings taking place," said Peter resignedly.

"I'm afraid not," said Mr. Wink with a spark of real sincerity. And he added, "Then there is only the writing."

"Yes, I must puzzle my wits over the writing," agreed Peter.

"Let us hope that it will have a happy issue," said Mr. Wink.

Peter nodded. He could not offer an opinion. The writing baffled and confused him, filled him with fear and hope. He put it into his pocket-book. After a few more questions he left. He went straight back to "Green Ladies"; there seemed nothing else to do.

## XXXIX

**E**DEN picked up a photograph and looked at it, and presently Peter was aware that he was looking at it.

Peter had returned from the lawyers his mind a maze of perplexities. The coming of the writing had been a shock. That strange, evil handwriting, which, once seen, could never, Peter decided, be forgotten, had entered into the drama of happenings with all the elements of a direct clue. Until he had seen the writing his feeling that things would work out rightly had been a matter of presentiment, of fancy. The writing had made presentiment a surety, he was certain.

He knew the writing. Undoubtedly he knew it. He knew it as one knows an intimate face. And yet, as one may know a face extraordinarily well and still forget the name of the person, so he could not for the life of him recall the circumstances in which he had seen that writing.

He had seen it, but when and where and in what circumstances? During the whole of the train journey he had racked his brains to remember, and he had not remembered. During the

## GREEN LADIES

night he had tossed and turned in a sleepless bed to remember, and he had not remembered. The fact was so near his grasp and yet it eluded him always. He was worried and bothered and irritable. He must remember where he had seen the writing. How could he possibly forget. The thing was so vital, so significant, so much was bound up in it, that it made him furious that his memory should be so ineffectual.

He had returned home. He had hesitated about going to Phillippa and had decided against it. He must recall something about this baffling familiar writing presently, and until he had made his discovery for good or ill he felt he could not face the girl. He might raise hopes that would end in agony, if the fellow was alive. He might not even be able to remember.

He had sat long thinking it out. Yes, his familiarity with the writing was recent, it had occurred since he had left South America. But where had it occurred? Under what circumstances? Had he seen it in England, or in the East, or in France, or after his return to England? And why had he seen it and how? What business had introduced it to him? Was it connected with a living man, or a dead man? His heart became cold at that. If he had seen the writing that spoke of a living man, it must have been sent by a living man.

## GREEN LADIES

But he did not know, he could not remember. Tax his brain as he would he could find no light, there was no answer to his eternal questioning.

In the early morning hours he resolved some order into his thoughts. He had not seen the writing in South America, he was certain of that. He had seen it since, that is, since he had returned to England to serve in the war. Very well, he must go over all the circumstances of his life since he returned from South America. He must take his life even day by day and carefully examine each day, and all the happenings of each day. He must be systematic. After breakfast he would go over his war kit, examine all the papers, and particularly go through his diaries. He would start on his valise, where all his portable papers and material relating to his years of service were stored, and he would examine every item carefully and in order.

Eden had come into the little neat study with letters and had found him at it.

He had attacked the problem with method. He would not be haphazard. He had spread out all the papers, his photographs and his books on the desk and about the room. Roughly he had parceled these items out into their respective years; his period of training in England; his service at the Dardanelles, his stay in hospital when

## GREEN LADIES

he had gone sick at the Dardanelles; his service in Palestine, his period in hospital there; and so on. He was ranging them, getting them in order when Eden came into the room.

He had not looked up when Eden came into the room. He would not have looked up, so occupied was he, had not Eden lingered in the room. Had not Eden, in a manner rather unexpected, looked down at a photograph, looked down at it a second time, lifted it up and stood gazing at it.

Peter turned about and saw him staring at the thing with a troubled recognition in his eyes. Peter on one knee paused and stared, and he felt that the silence was rather big, rather pregnant. He felt that the matter was ended; the final critical moment had come.

And presently Eden took his eyes from the photograph and caught Peter's eyes.

There was a look of bewilderment, of distress, in the old man's face. He glanced at Peter with a look of appeal.

He asked,

"Will you pardon me, sir. . . . but in this photograph . . . would you mind telling me the name of . . . of this sergeant . . . ?"

Peter rose slowly to his feet and went to the old man's side. It seemed to him that the room, the whole world, was curiously still. It seemed to



## GREEN LADIES

him that the air was in some subtle fashion thrilled by the momentousness of this happening. He stood at Eden's side and looked at the photograph and saw what he had expected to see there.

It was a gray and inefficient photograph of the kind French photographers so often took of British soldiers in billets. It represented a group of officers and non-commissioned officers and Peter was in it. It was, in fact, a photograph of the officers and N. C. O.'s of the company in which Peter had served in France.

Peter looked at it and he wanted to shout,

"Which one?" he said to Eden deliberately. The old man put his finger on the Company Sergeant Major.

"His name," said Peter, with a composure that belied the racing beat of his pulse, "his name was John Allard."

"Yes," said Eden reflectively, "his mother's name was Allard."

He said it as though he saw some significance in the fact.

"You know him?" asked Peter, steadying his voice against the rush of exultance. For the thing was done. The whole mystery was solved. The man whose writing he knew was found. The meaning of the dream, of the handclasp, of everything was made unmistakably clear.

## GREEN LADIES

"Yes, sir," said Eden slowly, "I knew him."

"Shall I tell you his right name?" asked Peter.

The old man looked up at him, his quick, kind old eyes examined Peter's face.

"You know it is Mr. James Patricot, sir?" he said.

"Miss Phillippa's husband?"

The old man's look cried, "You know that too," but his tongue said,

"Yes, sir, Miss Phillippa's husband."

They stood regarding the photograph. Then presently Peter said quietly,

"He is dead. He died in the big retreat of 1918. He was shot. I was within ten yards of him when it happened. . . . He was my Sergeant-Major, you know. . . . I buried him."

Eden stared at the photograph. His eyes were soft.

"He wasn't a good man," he whispered. "He never was good. But he died a good death."

He put down the photograph.

"Does Miss Phillippa know, sir?" he asked.

"I am just going to write to her and tell her," said Peter.

Presently he sat down and told her all that had happened. How he had recognized the writing, but how he had failed to connect it with any definite memory. How Eden had both enabled

## GREEN LADIES

him to remember it was his Company Sergeant-Major's handwriting, and had identified the photograph of James Patricot.

He told her all the circumstances. He wrote, "This is the meaning of it all. This is why I of all men was sent to 'Green Ladies,' this is the reason of the dream." And then, when he had written, he sent the letter to Phillippa by the hand of Eden.

"I have told Miss Phillippa everything," he said to the old man, "but I think you are the only one to give her this news in the way she should hear it. Tell her, and then give her my letter."

He went on the terrace, and with his eyes on the golden sunlight shining on the waters and the Island and the garden and the spilled jewel casket of Eden's flowers, he sat and thought.

## XL

**I**N the dusk of the following day Peter sat with the girl on the cliff and talked,

"I dreamt again last night, Phillippa," he said to the soft shadow so close to him in the dusk. "It was the same dream, yet not the same. I held your hand, and we pressed on, only . . . "

"My dear," she said softly, "I know. Let me tell you the rest . . . Only we had passed the last of the trees, and the darkness was gone, the blackness was behind us. And we were out in the sunlight. Wasn't it golden, and how big the world was? And the sea was beneath us, and we felt the great wind blowing in our faces, and heard the friendly noise of the sea. Everything was radiant, the sea and the sky and the sun and the color went on in joy forever."

"Yes, that was the dream. We stood there and looked and laughed, and we still held each other's hand."

He put out his hand and found hers waiting for him, and once again he felt the warm, soft fluttering fingers beneath his.

## GREEN LADIES

After a moment he said, speaking softly,

"And the strange part of the dream was that the place on which we stood was 'Green Ladies.' The garden of 'Green Ladies' was about us, 'Green Ladies' was behind us. We hadn't won through a new land, only to 'Green Ladies.' "

"It isn't strange," she said, and she laughed softly. " 'Green Ladies' is our happiness. It was always meant to be."

(1)

THE END









**UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY**

**Los Angeles**

**This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.**

---

50m-7,'69(N296s4)—C-120

175

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



**A** 000 555 532 1



